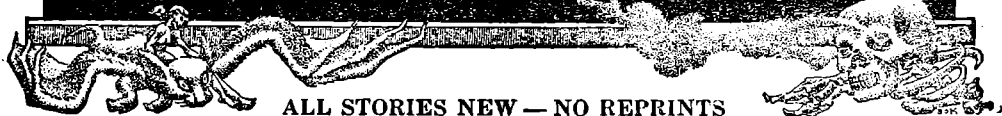


Weird Tales



JANUARY, 1950

Cover by Matt Fox

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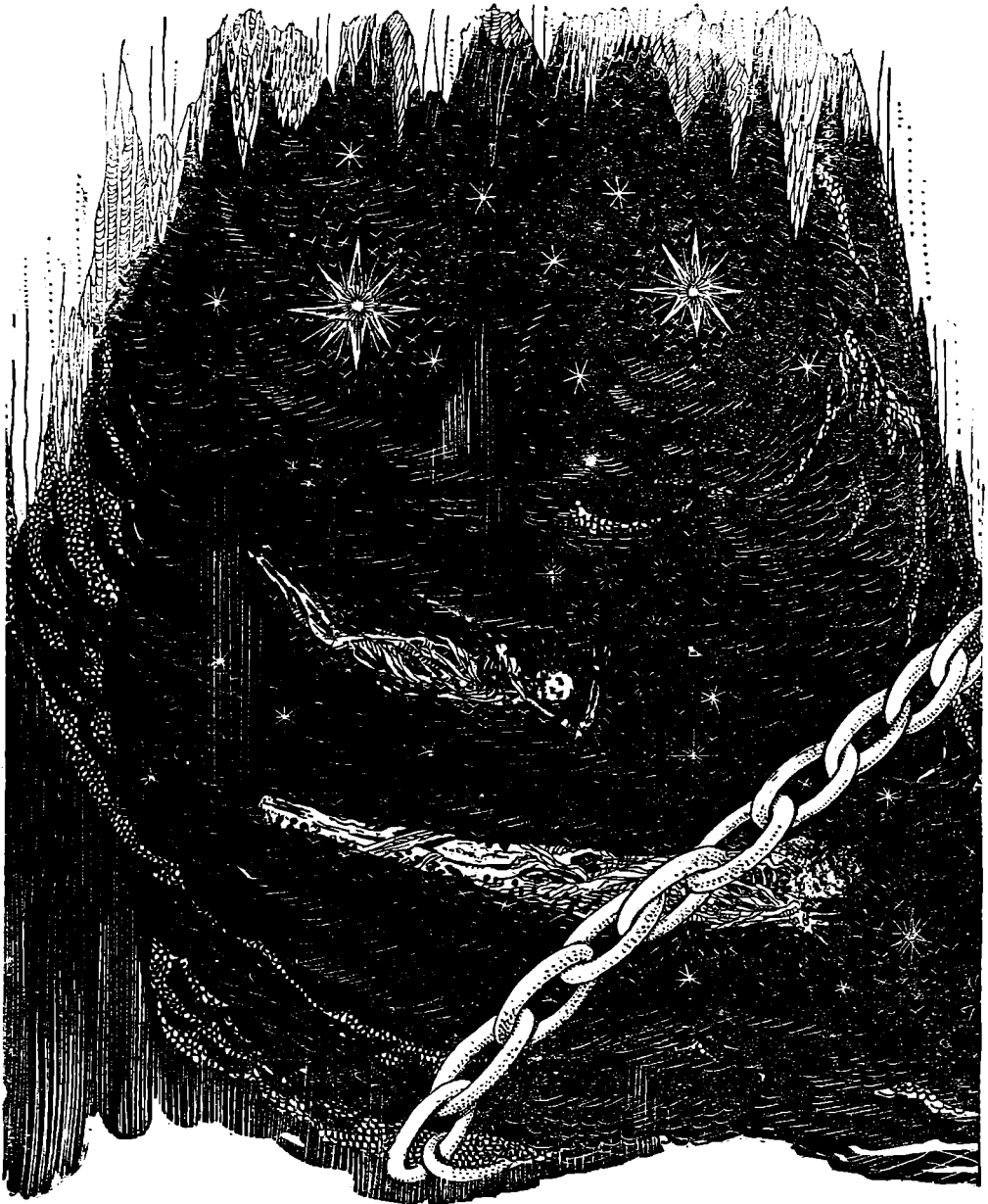
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Vol. 42, No. 2

Black Harvest of Moraine

By Arthur J. Burks



Heading by Vincent Napoli

THE HATED DRAW

I HAD been afraid of that particular field since I could remember. It was atop a mounded promontory where two whispering draws met. It looked like a monstrous brazen bosom spangled with pebbles of many colors, all of them round and smooth with age. My uncle's farmhouse sat in the side of the draw, perhaps seventy feet below the surface of the field, but sufficiently above the draw's floor to escape sudden inundation. I hated the draw, called Toler Draw, and the nameless other draws that came into it from the east, but both fascinated me so that when I visited my uncle I could not be satisfied without venturing onto the pebbly bosom of the shoulders of the high field and down into the secondary draw.

A "draw," out West, is a deep ravine or gully.

I was fifteen years old when my fear of the field between the two draws came to a head because I could see my ancient fear in the faces of the other harvest hands. I watched Charles Norman, my uncle, who acted as separator tender of the combined harvester. He stood atop the combined harvester and stared moodily out across the half

section of wheat we were about to harvest, if he gave the word. On the lefthand side of the separator, on his little platform, the sack sewer, a Norwegian, sat on his little box under the twin spouts and watched Charles Norman. He had tried his best to talk Charles out of harvesting this half section. Apparently he had failed, but he had done his best.

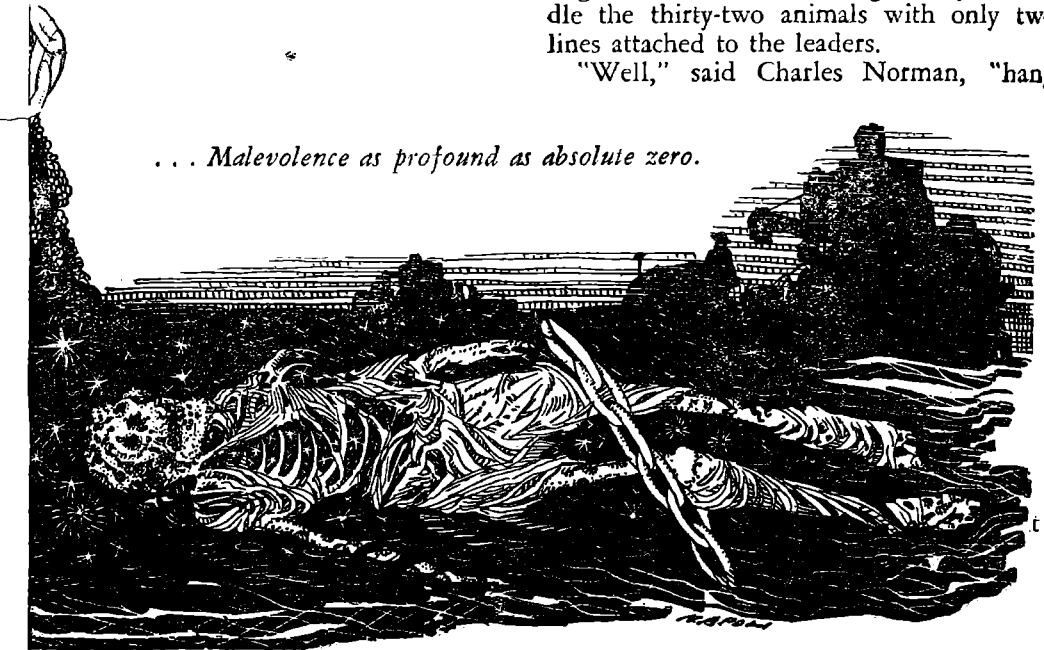
Lonnie Keel, fourteen, tended the header. He had affixed a seat to the railing above the open maw of the cylinders at the inner end of the header; he sat on it now, hands engaged in the spokes of the wheel, watching me. I could see he was afraid, too, but excited as only an ambitious youngster can get.

I had tended header the two previous harvests, but now I drove the whole shebang, thirty-two head of horses and mules, five teams of six animals each with two leaders. The separator was run by a distillate engine set just behind the teams, at the base of the slanting ladder that led up to the dizzy seat where the driver, myself, Cappy Payne, tried to still the hammering of his heart.

Even yet Charles Norman had not decided for sure. There was danger in the high wheat, nobody knew just how great or varied. Then, the crew was untried, even to the horses and mules. Only the oldest animals had worked ahead of the clamoring engine. I felt it took courage to try to handle the thirty-two animals with only two lines attached to the leaders.

"Well," said Charles Norman, "hang

... Malevolence as profound as absolute zero.



onto the jugheads, we're getting under way!"

I faced the front. Charles Norman, a man of forty or so, climbed down to the distillate engine, cranked it. My horses and mules almost jumped through their collars when the engine broke into raucous song and the hidden machinery of the combined harvester began its roaring. Out of the harvester rose the dust left from last year's last work in the fields, to form a brown cloud about the ponderous machinery.

"Steady, Kate! Hold it, Jerry!" I spoke softly to my leaders, one a sensitive horse mare, the other a steady old mule who had been combined harvester leader since my uncle first owned one of the roaring monsters. I had handled all these animals on other farm equipment, so they knew my voice. I managed to keep them steady.

The blades of the header were tapping at the first of the wheat in the field, folding them back onto the canvas of the conveyor. Even this gentle hammering, for the wooden blades were intended only to keep wheat stalks from bending away under the reaper and being lost behind the machine, emphasized the thing all of us feared: for out of those few heads came the bronze, slick-looking, sooty smut which had turned the old field into a horror.

We all stared at the field as Norman climbed back onto the separator. As far as we could see the heads of wheat which should have gone fifty bushels to the acre, should have been white and firm under the hulls, were a sullen black that threatened to burst from the heads in an ebon inundation.

None of us had ever seen a field so smutted.

"Charlie," John Cavick, the sack sewer had said, "the best thing you can do with that field, for the good of the neighbors if not for yourself, is set it afire! You won't save ten bushels to the acre, and you'll scatter smut from Hades to breakfast!"

"Even ten bushels will keep me out of the red," said Norman. "I've got to take the risk. Of course, if you're afraid to tackle it, maybe I can hire someone else in Waterville."

"I'll do any work anywhere anybody else

will," said Cavick, but he kept right after Uncle Charles to the moment I actually started pushing those thirty-two head of animals around the huge field.

There was a weirdness about the field we all recognized. It was surrounded by vast fields of neighbors, and on the north, across the main road, was another half section belonging to Norman, too. No other field in the county suffered smut! How did it happen that this one field alone should be so ridden with it? And why should an aura of *waiting*, of *threat*, of psychic terror, hang over this one particular field? I confess my own terrors went back further than those of Cavick, Lonnie, Uncle Charles or anyone else. I kept remembering from childhood, my secret adventures into the two draws, around the mounded bosom of the high field. I remembered badgers drumming into the holes among the sagebrush along the wash at the bottom of the subsidiary draw. I had flushed skulking coyotes, jackrabbits, cottontails, and almost scared myself to death when an occasional sagehen whirred out of hiding in some area of eerie silence. I had heard old tales of strange walkers among the brush, tales told around late supper tables for the sole purpose of scaring kids of the dark.

CHARLES NORMAN, atop the separator, hesitated again. I was looking back at him. I held a small rock in my hand. Above the roaring of the engine a man couldn't hear himself think. Charles Norman nodded to me. He had made his final decision. The die was cast.

"Kate! Jerry!" I heaved the rock out ahead of my leaders, careful not to hit either of them. The mules and horses hit their tugs. The huge combined harvester began to move. I had to hold back the animals to keep them from traveling too fast to catch the grain. It was almost as if they, too, feared the field and were running away from it. But for them, as far as I know, it was the motor they feared, and the fact that they could not seem to outrun it.

Almost instantly the harvester and everybody on it, including myself perched out there atop that ladder far in advance of the main body of the machine, including the horses and mules, disappeared into a

black-bronze pall, a towering smut cloud that was utterly terrifying. The header, an eighteen-foot "cut," which meant that it cut a swath eighteen feet wide if I held the team so that the header cut its entire width—a driving trick I made up my mind I could manage—laid the smutted wheat back on the drapers, the reapers cut off the stalks, the drapers bore the fallen wheat up the short feed into the body of the machine where the threshing took place. Out of the main body of the machine straw fell into a trip behind the separator, where the header tender, with a long rope attached to his railing, dumped it at intervals in piles behind us. The wheat, separated from the stalks and fanned of chaff, poured into the sacks on Cavick's platform, to be sewn, slid into the carrier beside him, which slanted down to within a few inches of the ground, and tripped when there were six sacks.

Separate from the harvester was the sack-buck, a husky man with a team and a flat-bed wagon, who hauled the sacks to central piling areas.

Nobody aboard the harvester saw the sack-buck, Karl Orme, while the harvester moved, because we could not see out of the pall of smut. That cloud, as smut burst from the wheat inside the harvester, belched out of every nook and cranny. Some of the spores burst on hitting the drapers, some when touched by the fanning blades, some burst on the first contact.

The rising smut cloud, which followed us like Nemesis because there was no wind, was worse than any dust storm I had ever witnessed. Looking back and down to the right it was all I could do to see the inner end of the header, to know whether I was cutting too wide a swath and missing some, or using less than I should of the "cut." I could just see. But up ahead, when I tried to see my laboring animals, I could scarcely see Kate and Jerry, my leaders. The horses and mules, even those directly under me, which included the first twelve animals, six abreast, were vague shadowy phantoms in the sooty pall.

I COULD make out the back of Cavick as he worked like some imp out of hell there on his little platform, fighting the sack-jigger from which poured a stream that

would have been wheaten gold if it had not been for the smut. Even with all the fanning, vast amounts of smut went into the wheat sacks. Cavick had turned black and hideous within a few minutes. He had a bright red bandanna about his neck; it became black-bronze in no time. Atop the harvester Lonnie and Uncle Charles were black gnomes in the cloud, and when Uncle Charles walked back to the rear of the separator to study his mazes of wheels, sprockets, belts and pullies, he mingled so closely with the cloud that I could not see him unless he moved an arm suddenly.

I leaned back and looked up. The sun itself was a blur through the horror. Horror? That's what I said. True or not, there was a terror about smut. Most farmers believed that it could be ignited, that it might at any time explode, if there were enough of it, by spontaneous combustion. No farmer would allow his hands to smoke where there was even the vaguest hint of smut, and every last one of us, before coming to the field, had supposedly ditched his matches at the farmhouse. I could just imagine what it would be like even if the smut did no more than take *fire*. It expanded outward, that thick cloud, to hold us within its heart and travel along with us around the field, clockwise. A series of swaths had already been cut around the field, some weeks earlier, with a binder. Good hay had been the result, and this was another one of the fear-provoking facts about this particular field. There had been no evidence of smut in the *hay!*

The smut had apparently come full into being between a night and a morning!

Horses, mules and farm hands, especially in harvest time, become accustomed to choking dust. I had driven for hours in clouds of ordinary dust as thick as this without much discomfort, though a doctor would have thrown up his hands and uttered all sorts of dire things. I hadn't even coughed. Mules and horses coughed occasionally, but it never seemed to be anything that a good long drink of water at noon and night would not arrange.

Now, though, before I even reached the first corner and started the ponderous swinging of that team—there'd have been fifty-six head if Uncle Charles hadn't "modernized"

by attaching the engine to run the separator—everyone on the separator was coughing. Lonnie sounded as if he had whooping cough; deep, rasping, tearing coughs burst from apparently the very bottom of his lungs. Cavick coughed as if he was swearing. Uncle Charles coughed like a consumptive, as if he would spit blood any instant. I coughed as if I were young again, and lost, and sobbing.

But the worst was the coughing of the mules and horses. Men can help themselves. They can stop work. Animals are slaves and must obey their owners and masters. Thirty-two head of mules and horses then, about half of each, struggled grimly through the sooty pall and coughed, deep and drumming, out of their very guts.

I made the first turn. The cloud went with us! It should have gone straight ahead, mind you; why should the *cloud* have turned the corner? I wondered if anybody noticed it but me.

THERE were tiny draws in the great field. When we slid down into one I could reach out to right and left and touch the backs of my rearmost animals. When we rose out of the ditch I leaped at the sky like hay on the end of a pitchfork, legs hooked around the jacobstaff to keep from being thrown. These ditches and steep side-hills were why Uncle Charles did not use tractors to pull the harvester in this particular field—mules and horses could manage better.

By the time we reached the second corner of the huge half section, with all its wheat-covered knolls, deep pitches, steep hillsides where the leveler had to be worked like crazy to keep the monster from overturning, I was conscious of something new in the cloud of smut: in some eerie fashion it was *in tune with the chugging of the motor and the drumming of machinery in the guts of the separator, with the low murderous growling of the cylinders especially.* These cylinders now, for the benefit of the mechanically minded, were not the cylinders of the engine; they were the two sets of opposing concave and convex metal "teeth" just behind the short feed from the drapers, through which the wheat passed—the heads to be ripped asunder by the teeth to sep-

arate the roughest wheat from the straw. I had known of men to go through those cylinders, come out in fingertip-sized pieces behind the separator.

There was, as I've indicated, an eternal murderous growl about those cylinders when the separator was in gear that made me afraid for the header tender, Lonnie. I'd had that job for two years myself, and always the cylinders had seemed to me to be too close under me for comfort. A bit of dizziness, a fall, and the machine couldn't be thrown out of gear fast enough to keep a man out of the metal teeth.

But why should I fear that now? Because of the sound I *felt* in the sooty cloud—keeping time with the roaring of the cylinders!

The cloud stayed with us as we traveled the far side, slow, ponderous, noisy, every living thing of us coughing his guts out, and started back on the fourth side, which paralleled the subsidiary draw that had always held such terror for me as a child. The side of the draw was steep. I had plowed and seeded it myself, plowing and seeding down as far as I could, to where the streambed was just too steep for anything but a goat—where only sagebrush and rye grass grew. Down there I knew was the perpendicular wash with badger holes in the banks, and big mounds on the streambed. Down there was land that to me, even at fifteen, was terror-land.

You see, I had always, from earliest memories of visits to Uncle Charles' place, been conscious that the entire high field resembled a monstrous grave-mound! It was a feeling I could not escape, of which I could not rid myself. If my feeling had any basis in fact—and I doubted it too much ever to mention it to anyone—*what was buried under it and how far back did it date?*

As we fought our way back to the starting corner, around that gargantuan bosom, or grave mound, I had the strangest feeling that the deep freshet-bed, into which I could not see because of the borders of sagebrush and rye grass, was a-crawl with something. Badgers? Coyotes? Sagehens? Rabbits? What else had I ever seen or heard in the sandy hot wash? Nothing, save in imagination. But in imagination there had

been Indian bones, stalking warriors out of elder time—and things man no longer remembered or had heard about, dating back and back and back.

THIS part of the Big Bend country of the Columbia River was the tag-end of the Great Moraine, almost the exact line on which the Ice Age from the north died, began slowly retreating back to the Arctic.

Why I should remember that in that high field of strangely smutted grain I had no idea, *then*.

Uncle Charles signaled for a halt at the starting spot. The mules and horses, black with sweat all over their bodies, sweat into which the smut was worked like boring maggots, stood and coughed horribly. We all coughed.

The smut cloud did not move on, as it seemed it should. It just stayed there as we stayed, a dome of ebony glisten over and around us. There was a whiteness about the mouths, eyes and nostrils of men and beasts. Our hair and lashes were beaded with smut. Our lungs were afire with it. It tasted bitter as lye on our parched tongues.

I expected Uncle Charles to call it quits, but he was a stubborn man. He signaled for the second round.

II

EBON EXODUS

THE same stubbornness, suddenly, was in all of us. We refused to be beaten. How could any of us, simple farm people, have realized *what made us stubborn?* We were just people, descended from pioneer stock, who wouldn't allow a little thing like smut, to which all farmers were occasionally accustomed, to keep us from the harvest. The world was hungry, must be fed, and feeding the world gave us money for luxuries. That was the simple truth of it.

It wouldn't have made any difference, I realize now, if Uncle Charles had given orders to knock off, had decided to let the field rot, for once we had rounded the field we were *committed*. The damage, which we could not even guess at then, was already done.

I'll never know now how we got around

that second time. It's a long drag around a half section. At first, if you can make three "rounds" without leaving half the wheat, in half a day, you're doing all right. We made three rounds and that smut cloud never left us. The coughing was hideous. Lonnie especially felt it. He bent double as he coughed. He had had whooping cough that winter, I knew, and his lungs had been weakened by it.

The cloud had expanded and deepened unbelievably. I felt that every spore we had released from the wheat had joined the cloud. I felt that the rhythm I had sensed in the cloud was faster, should have been an audible sound to everybody on the separator, but everybody was too hard at work, too busy coughing, to pay any attention.

We were coming around the shoulder where the two draws merged when the first catastrophe happened—and I was to remember with horror that I had so often thought of this very possibility. *Had I made it happen?*

I heard a scream and whirled on my high perch to see Lonnie Keel fall upon the drapers, bounce, grab for the sides of the feed, ride the canvas into the maw of the machine. He screamed all the way in, until the cylinder teeth got him. His screaming made the mules and horses unmanageable for a full minute, and though Uncle Charles hurried to throw the machinery out of gear, there was no use. Lonnie Keel was doomed from the moment he fell.

And yet, he should have been able to grab the sides of the feed, haul himself out. He had tried, but as I thought of it later it seemed to me that his hands were *snatched* back, the clutching fingers *prevented* from pulling the boy out, saving his life. But of course every farmer knows how to compare hindsight with foresight. I was always one to do a lot of imagining.

The animals wouldn't stop until we made that last corner. Uncle Charles and Cavick were both off the separator, running back behind it. No doubting what they would find—the tiny bloody pieces of Lonnie Keel!

I swung the horses and mules to a halt finally. I fastened the two lines to the whipstock in the rock box, climbed down and killed the distillate-burning engine. Then,

sick, coughing, my fear a tangible thing now, I raced back to Uncle Charles and Cavick.

They were bending over something in the stubble.

I bent down, too. I got even sicker. There wasn't enough left of any part of Lonnie Keel to wad a shotgun! And yet, attached to some of the smallest bits were shreds and patches of his shirt, overalls and shoes!

We three were very close together.

"God!" said Uncle Charles. "Go ahead, Cavick, say you told me so! But that don't explain what made the kid fall! There was no reason. I saw him go, and it looked as if he was *pulled* off his seat, *thrown* into the cylinders!"

"I couldn't see," said Cavick, "there's too much machinery between me and the header tender—and the smut's too thick anyway!"

We moved back from the combined harvester, the three of us, and noted the pieces of Lonnie Keel, but I think I was the first to notice the real horror of what was just now really starting.

I was staring at a lump of flesh when it seemed to *move*. Then I realized that it wasn't a tiny piece of *Lonnie* that was moving, but something else that was moving *onto* the crimson flesh! It didn't take two shakes to figure out what it was. The smut was alive! It was a tiny glistening army. It crawled onto those pieces of flesh, covered them from sight, *fed upon them!*

Uncle Charles cried out. John Cavick swore savagely. There was nothing we could do for Lonnie, but even so the next move seemed cruel—at *first*. We heard one of the horses scream like a woman in pain. We all three straightened, whirled to look. Several of the horses and mules were down on their bellies in their harness, threshing, coughing—and now several of them followed suit of the first one and screamed. It isn't often, thank God, that a farmer hears a horse scream; usually only when the animal is dying in a fire.

"Get them out!" yelled Uncle Charles. "Get them out of the smut, down to the troughs!"

We didn't forget Lonnie, mind you, nor ourselves. I realized that I was more or less burning up myself, with something more

than the heat. A steadily increasing inward pressure was all over my body, and its warmth, too, was increasing.

Uncle Charles didn't ordinarily help with the draft animals, but he did this time. Lonnie usually handled eight head, while Cavick and I took twelve each; but Lonnie wouldn't be doing that kind of work ever again. Uncle Charles had to.

The animals were half crazy but they knew us, knew we were trying to save them, so they stood, fretting a little but not so much, until we had all the tugs unfastened and folded back inside the back-bands.

I mounted Kate. Uncle Charles mounted one of the others, Cavick a third. The rest were apportioned among us, held together by their halter chains. I gave the word to Kate when the rest signaled they were ready.

My twelve head of animals, as if at a signal, broke into a dead run from a standing start. It almost threw me. But behind us the rest came on just as fast, as if invisible whips had suddenly been laid upon the backs of every last one!

My twelve headed for the gate and the main road. I did not try to hold them in. It would have been no use. I yelled ahead for the chore-man we had left in the barnyard to have the yard gate open. I could see it start swinging inward as we started down the steep rocky grade into the draw. Our galloping had thunder in it, and danger. If one horse or mule even stumbled we would have a murderous pile-up.

I looked back once. Cavick and Uncle Charles were clinging to their riding animals for dear life. I expected somehow to find the smut cloud still with us, but it had halted, rather oddly I thought, partly in and partly outside the field gate. The cloud reached fully a thousand feet into the air and seemed to hover over the entire field.

I thought, as we swung crazily into the gate like chariots taking a dangerous turn, that the smut cloud, on whose sides the sun shone as on the back of a smoothly curried horse, was beginning to sink down upon the field. I saw Karl Orme, the sack-buck, come racing through the gate, standing spread-legged in his flatbed sack wagon, his horses apparently crazy with fear. I saw him fight the lines, turn and face the field from which all of us had just escaped. Yes,

even then I used the word, "escaped!" Then Karl Orme did an odd thing, though I didn't see all of it because I had things of my own to do. He jumped from his wagon, lashed his animals into a dead run, and moved slowly back, afoot, to the gate in which the smut cloud seemed to hesitate. It was afterward I remembered that slow, queer return.

Then I lost Karl Orme behind the barn as my animals reached the huge circular galvanized tank in the barnyard, so big that all of Uncle Charles' animals could drink from it at once. I flung myself from Kate's back as Cavick and Uncle Charles swung their animals in against the tank, too.

Uncle Charles yelled at Cavick and me while he himself ran awkwardly toward the blacksmith shop where he kept tools, hoses, odds and ends always needed around a farm.

"Into the tank, both of you!" Uncle Charles yelled. "Get your clothes off! I'll be right back!"

Odd, but I had been wanting to fling myself into the tank. The water in it was about three and a half feet deep. The horses and mules pushed their nostrils clear under. I saw all their eyes bulged. There were lines of white about them.

AUNT CLAUDIA and my two gal cousins came running from the house to ask silly questions just as Uncle Charles came from the shop with a length of hose. He yelled at his wife and daughters:

"Get back away from us! Don't stop for anything, but go on past the house to the next neighbor's. Stay by the telephone there. I'll let you know what to do! *Run!*"

Naturally they thought Uncle Charles was crazy, and I thought so, too, but they turned and fled as their forebears must have fled from charging Indians. Women and girls can run when they're scared.

Uncle Charles flung himself into the tank with Cavick and me.

Cavick and I had both dived in, going clear under, much to the amazement of the horses and mules. Then, standing, we stripped off our clothes, and began to wash our hair, bathe our bodies. Uncle Charles followed suit, but his first thought was of the animals. He affixed one end of the hose to the faucet, turned it on full, and

began spraying the horses and mules. The water had plenty of pressure and the stream was strong, but each animal seemed to realize at once that again their best interests were being taken care of.

While he worked on himself Uncle Charles handed the hose to me. I worked on the animals, too. I watched the smut which had covered them vanish into the longer hair under their bellies. I washed that off, too. Karl Orme's team reached the tank, hauling back to stop the wagon as if Orme had still been in it.

I washed them off, too, then John Cavick took a crack at it. Still there were no explanations of anything.

Soon Karl Orme, hatless, his legs pumping like those of a college sprinter, came through the gate, pushed past the animals and flung himself into the trough. Was all this crazy, even a little humorous? Not if you remembered Lonnie Keel and the creeping smut spores which had started devouring his remnants.

Karl Orme stood in the tank, began ripping off his clothes. I noticed that Uncle Charles, standing there in the tank from which now rose the odor of smut, stared up the rounded mound of the drawside at his smutted field. Over the field hung a tremendous black cloud, into which shot tongues of flame. Uncle Charles whirled on Karl Orme.

"What happened, Karl?" he choked. "You were the last out of the field. Did it just take fire?"

"No, Charlie," said Orme grimly, "I took the law into my own hands. Your stubbornness might cost lives. I saw Lonnie Keel tumble, read sign when you went back to look. The rest was just common sense. I dashed out of the field, freed the horses, turned back and took the greatest chance I ever hope to take. *I threw a match into the cloud!*"

"How dared you do such a thing?" demanded Uncle Charles hoarsely. "You're a hired hand! You've set fire to a half section of wheat. My loss will run into thousands—"

"And how many lives?" said Karl Orme softly. "Listen, Charlie, while I tell you something. I picked up those smutty sacks that John here sewed and dropped. There

was smut in all of them. I had piled maybe a hundred in one area, when what do you suppose happened?"

"How would I know?" said Uncle Charles sulkily.

"The sacks began bursting their seams!" said Karl Orme. "They just exploded like over-inflated toy balloons, *and the smut began creeping out, to spread on the ground!* I knew if I didn't take steps your stubbornness would return us all to the field of smut, and no telling *what* might happen!"

"And now," said Uncle Charles hoarsely, "you've completely released the *things* in the wheat!"

"*Things?*" said Karl Orme. "What are you talking about. I've burned out that half section, or will have within an hour. The smut won't spread to neighboring fields. The fire—"

"Fire won't do anything to *this*," said Uncle Charles. "It will just complete, a lot faster, the exodus of the——"

WHAT he was going to say I didn't know then, couldn't even guess, for all four of us noticed the same thing at the same time. We had washed from ourselves the smut which had been driving us crazy. We had drunk deeply to wash the stuff out of our gullets. The smut had lain, a thin film, atop the water in the tank. Now we all saw that the stuff had drawn together atop the water, moved slowly to the sides of the tank where it became a thick brown mass. And that mass began crawling up the side of the tank to escape! The horses and mules saw it, snorted, backed away.

We couldn't find a thing to say. We moved to the side of the tank, watching that stuff—and as if it watched us also, and were afraid of being captured, *it gathered speed like some shapeless spider, slid over the rim of the tank, dropped to the ground beyond!* We heard it, and the sound had a kind of jeer in it, strike the ground.

We put our hands on the sides and looked down—just as the smut we had washed off the animals gathered in one place, joined that which had come out of the tank! The mass of smut was dark bronze. It formed a circular smudge, the center of which began to rise perceptibly.

As we stared, our mouths hanging open,

the smut-mass doubled in size, doubled again!

"John!" yelled Uncle Charles. "Get a stick of dynamite out of the shed. Cap it, fuse it, bring it here fast!"

It didn't look silly, not now, to see a naked man racing to the blacksmith shop. The mules and horses—as Karl Orme unhitched his two—retreated to a far corner of the barn yard. Orme started for the gate; he, too, was naked. Soon, we hoped, we could get to the house, get into fresh clothes.

John Cavick came running back. He raced to the house to get matches. He had cut the fuse awfully short. The smut-mass was now five-feet across, still roughly circular. Then it was ten feet across. Then Cavick was back, and all of us ducked into the water as the stick of dynamite was dropped into the mass.

After the explosion we looked out. The smut-mass was nowhere to be seen. Even then I felt I could hear queer jeering laughter in the very air.

Cavick swore again. Uncle Charles began to pray. I felt like it myself. Not much explanation was needed. Scores of circular smut-masses suddenly sprang into being in the barnyard, and as far in all directions as we could see. That dynamite had blown the mass into tiny bits. But already each bit had grown, expanded, until we could see it.

As each of us noted this, each circular smut-smudge *jumped* in size, its center rose like the crown of a hat, a *peon's* hat, pointed!

"The telephone!" said Uncle Charles, almost moaning. "We've got to have help! And clothes!"

Uncle Charles was an old man as he crawled out of the tank, started a dripping run for the house. As we ran we watched the smut-masses *jumping, spreading, growing*, all around us—and I for one wondered if even we started now, and ran faster and faster, we could ever again escape them.

"Look!" said Karl Orme, as he turned at the door to look back the way we had come.

There was now no smoke, no fire, on the high field. There was no smut cloud. But a fringe of bronze extended all along the edge of the field we could see—and as I

looked the fringe crept noticeably down the mounded side of the hill where the two draws met!

III

HOPELESS STRUGGLE

BY noon of the next day it seemed to me there had never been a time when we hadn't been fighting the smut. We still called it "smut" because that had been the manner of its appearance, but none of us really believed that's what it was—not any more. An agricultural expert from Port Orchard flew in the next morning after Uncle Charles appealed for help by telephone. He put some of the "smut" under his microscope.

"It's not kernel, covered or naked smut," he said. "It's not *tilletia tritici* or *levis*. It's not *Ustilago tritici* or *Urocystis tritici*. In fact, Norman, it's not smut at all! I don't know what it is!"

The horror surrounding the death of Lonnie Keel had long since become a minor thing. Too much else had happened since. In the first place, firing the smut had released every bit of it simultaneously from the wheat by destroying the wheat around it. Fire seemed to have no other effect on the stuff.

First, the smut-masses we had washed off ourselves and the horses and mules had widened, spread, grown upward, to meet the brown-black fringe which seemed to be overflowing from the high field. That smut, creeping down the bosom of the field like molasses running down outside the neck of a jug was a hellish thing to watch.

Birds, animals, everything in the area, became aware of the creeping horror. Grass on the hillside disappeared, devoured by the stuff. By the next morning, after Uncle Charles had told Aunt Claudia and the cousins to bed down with neighbors, they'd be in the battle line soon enough, hundreds of men and women were helping to fight the smut.

The entire field, which I had seen from an airplane—one of a dozen that constantly circled above the area of spreading spores—was blanketed with the stuff. Moreover, the center of the field was now easily two hun-

dred feet in height. The stuff had moved inexorably out in all directions. Charles Norman's own wheat on the north was being devoured. Some of the men who fought the creeping smut insisted they could hear the stuff *chew*, as if the smut were animal and equipped with a myriad of infinitesimal mandibles. Every kind of fire fighting equipment was on the job that was within reach. Flame-throwers from the nearest army base had been tried. Everything had been hurled into that mess except an atom bomb. It was bent on reaching in all directions, we were all sure, but it would travel slower if we fought it and didn't deliberately spread it.

The smut-mass advanced without the slightest harm into the hottest tongues of flame from the flame throwers which had wrought such havoc among Japs and Germans in World War Two.

Brave men faced the slowly advancing horde with clubs, rifles, wet sacks. They sprayed it with water, with kerosene, gasoline. They fought themselves to a standstill, but the stuff seemed invincible. When the fighters against the growing smut-mass thought they had found the answer, the whole mass shuddered, and extended itself in all directions.

Casualties were somewhat high. A dozen men, daring too greatly, had come in contact with the smut and vanished into it, utterly possessed and destroyed by it, as Lonnie Keel had been.

I THINK every conceivable kind of machine was turned loose on that growing, rising, spreading mass. X-rays, some special secret rays used by the army and navy the exact nature of which I was not informed, were turned on the stuff—and without effect.

The smut-mass did not seem to devour inanimate things—for hours, that second day, we could see the shape of the combined harvester through the growing mass, right where we had left it on the rounded bosom of the hill.

"The smut," said our agricultural expert and scientists of more kinds than I knew or can remember agreed with him, "is an entity or a vast community of entities. If we don't solve the secret there is no way of

telling how far the stuff may go. But where did it come from?"

"It came out of the wheat," my Uncle explained. But when he made it clear, and his neighbors backed him up, that only his field, in all the thousands of acres held by him and his neighbors, had been possessed by the blight, science admitted it had come to a dead end.

"It has to come from somewhere," said Doctor Larsen, the man whom the government entrusted with the secret rays that had been used without effect on our smut-mass. "I can't escape the feeling that in the sudden appearance and spread of this 'smut' there is clear evidence of *intent!*"

Up until I heard that I would not have spoken my thoughts for anything in the world. I'm ordinarily a bit shy. But now I offered my own two cents worth.

"Not only intention," I said, "but scientific implementation of it!"

Larsen whirled on me. "I've been thinking the same thing, kid!" he said. "Just what are you driving at?"

"The field," I said, somewhat breathlessly "lies in the general line of the ancient ice fields which came down, ages ago, from the north. The draws have been dug by ice action and seepage from glaciers. That's what my geology teacher said in high school last term, anyway. If there were intelligent life in the land before the ice came down, what happened to it?"

Tired men, resting for a few minutes from fighting the creeping mass, heard me and snorted.

"Cocky kid!" said someone. "Probably write poetry when he grows up, like his utterly useless old man!"

"Do any of you gentlemen," said Larsen, "have any idea about these secret rays I've been using to fight against your smut?"

They shook their heads.

"Then," Larsen continued, "there may be other things ye also wot not of! Go ahead, kid, what's on your mind?"

"I've always felt that the high field was part of some huge grave mound, just because of the shape of it. I've thought since I was little that strange things might be buried in it. Now I wonder what may be a crazy thing—"

"Let us judge what's crazy and what

isn't," said Larsen. "Every pathfinder has been crazy in the eyes of his contemporaries. Go on."

"I think there's something under the hill, deep down," I said. "I think it's been there for thousands, maybe millions of years, dormant, resting. Now it has reached out. It is life, whatever life it was that ice destroyed, or forced to flee. The intelligence locked under the hill set a trap for us—the smut! We stepped into it and got caught. It reached up somehow from down under, manifested itself as smut."

"You talk as if this isn't new to you," said Larsen, interrupting. "Why isn't it?"

"I've always felt something in the draws, Toler Draw and Norman Draw, the one coming into it from the east," I hurried on. People were close to me now, listening, and I had help from an unexpected quarter.

"I always hated what the kid calls Norman Draw, myself," said Herb Slasser, Uncle Charles' neighbor to the west. "I used to go in there, twenty years ago, before Norman broke the land around it, to get myself a sagehen. *I always felt like running out!* I know there can't be anything in there bigger than badgers or coyotes, yet I finally got so I wouldn't go in there for a sagehen if I was starving!"

"I used to feel," I said, "as if there was someone behind me, who always ducked out of sight when I whirled to look. I always thought I'd run into something hideous around the next turn ahead. I never did, but I always knew why—it *kept just out of sight!*"

"What nonsense!" said the army colonel who commanded the flame throwing equipment and operators. "What can a yokel who has something like second sight tell us that will help combat this stuff?"

A GROUP of people was standing now on the side of the draw opposite where we had left the combine. The draw itself was filled with the smut mass to within a few feet of our level. There was danger, and we all knew it, that it would surge up and out and swallow us all, but the danger was so constant, so commonplace now that we almost ignored it.

"Certainly what he suggests," said Lar-

sen, "can't accomplish less than we have! We've tried now to destroy this creeping stuff with every vibration controlled or operated by man—sound waves, electric currents, X-rays, gamma rays, even cosmic—"

Nobody could think of a destructive implement or technique that hadn't been tried on the smut-mass. As we talked there the sooty, shining, ebony-stir stuff in Toler Draw lurched, came within a few feet of our bodies. We stepped back. I stooped again to look. Tentacles so small, so tenuous as to be almost invisible, were reaching out at us through the interstices of the soil on which we stood! And others were coming upward through the soil. I was right, I had to be right—the source of the danger was somewhere underground, maybe far underground.

Larsen more or less had charge of the sector in which we fought the smut-mass. He put his head together with the heads of the plane crews trying to probe the cloud with radar and sonar, trying to get some picture of just what it might be.

"Can you find out for me," he asked, "whether there are any caverns hereabouts?"

NOT until the next day, when three Sprengnether earthquake seismographs were set up at the apices of a triangle several miles on each side, with the high field in the triangle's center, was this question answered. Then they did something they called "seismic prospecting for head waves," carried out under Larsen's supervision—he seemed to know everything about everything—and the seismologists all agreed that there were caverns under the high field, not very far down, either!

No sooner had the word passed than half of Uncle Charles' neighbors said they had always known it. They had walked over the field years before and distinctly heard hollow sounds below! No local yokel was going to get ahead of the oldtimers, even if they had to lie a little.

Even my uncle said there had been times when he had felt hollow vibrations come up through the combined harvester and other heavy machinery. He could also remember times when mules and horses had shied, while working the high field, away from odd underfoot sounds!

But just what did it matter one way or the other? The entire mounded hill was now deeply buried under a sooty, glistening mass several hundred feet deep all over it! There wasn't a chance of any kind of penetrating the hill into a cavern that might be occupied—*by what was such a cavern likely to be occupied?*

When somebody thought to ask that question a dreadful silence settled over everybody, a silence so deep you could hear the little chewing mouths of the smut.

"Find a way or not," some farmer put it in words, "you wouldn't get me even *trying* to get into it for all the gold in the world!"

"There must be some kind of material," I averred, not feeling as smart and cocky as I must have sounded to the others, "in which men can move into and down under the smut-mass. It apparently doesn't eat metal, plastic, things like that."

"But if there happens to be joints, anywhere at all, through which the stuff can reach your body," said Larsen, "you're just the more firmly trapped in something. You have some idea like a diving suit of steel, or plastic, or something, maybe?"

"Yes, sir, and I'll help get into those caverns if somebody will go along, with lights, weapons, and whatever scientists think we need!" I wished I hadn't said that, even before I started, but a kid sometimes gets too big for his britches and keeps right on getting too big when he knows he is.

Larsen started working by telephone on the Navy at Bremerton. Yes, they could furnish water-tight suits, but would they be smut-tight? And how, if the suits worked, would we penetrate the scores of feet of soil, shale, clay and solid rock which intervened between the covering smut and the caverns in which, I think everybody now believed the smut originated, or from which it was directed?

We did some gambling on a wild theory: those entities down under had sought sanctuary from the Ice Age. Therefore they were averse to ice. We could establish a bridge-head on the surface of the ground from which we could operate, if we could freeze the area and keep back the smut at the right spot. That's a little obscure, but for the time being there's no help for it. And I've said it was a wild gamble on a wilder theory.

—every bit of which might be utterly wrong. We had tried dropping dry ice on the smut-mass and it had had no more effect than fire, rays, explosions, or anything else we had tried.

The three seismologists gave me a thrill, believe me, when I heard them say that the cavern was nearest the surface at a spot deep in the Norman Draw! They made a map for us, covered with what they called "microseisms" which meant nothing at all to me, but Larsen could read without trouble. I was perfectly sure, at this point, that I must have sensed the presence of that cavern when I first sneaked into Norman Draw when I was about six years old.

We were about twenty in number when we finally dared the smut-mass in our air-conditioned diving suits. I was allowed to go along because I knew Norman Draw, badger-hole by badger-hole, better even than Uncle Charles knew it. Besides, Aunt Claudia wouldn't let Uncle Charles even *offer* to go.

I held my breath when the twenty of us, looking like something out of other worlds, put our feet into the smut-mass, walked into it as we would have walked into a lake.

Gradually the stuff crawled up our bodies as we walked down into Toler Draw. I couldn't feel anything getting in, but horror rose up to my heart from my feet as the smut-mass rose and rose and finally covered the eye-pieces of my helmet.

Then I had to lead the way, fumbling with my feet, while behind me all the others clung to a rope which kept us from losing one another, perhaps forever.

IV

SANCTUARY OF THE AGES

I COULD see nothing through the eye-pieces but stygian darkness. But I knew the draws as I did not know the palms of my own hands. There were sandy stream-beds in each of them. I walked down the west side of Toler Draw, my unseen companions following me. There were times when I waited for the man immediately behind me to come up, bump into me. I had a horror of being lost from the others, of being alone on the deepening bottom

of the smut. It would have been dreadful. As it was, it was bad enough. It did not seem to me that there was any more weight on us as we went down into night-darkness, but there must have been some. I came to the steep sides of the first draw, which led away southeastward. I dropped down into it, with a sudden sickening feeling that there might no longer be a bottom; a thought that vanished when my heavy feet struck and sank leadenly into the sand. I turned right. I felt rather than heard my helpers drop into the wash behind me.

Now I moved to the east side of the wash, held out my hand against the dirt bank, moved along, guiding myself with my hand. As nearly as I could tell there was no material resistance to our advance. We strode through the smut far easier than if it had been water; as easily as if it had been the darkness to which I likened it. I sensed opposition; the same sort of opposition, only many times stronger, one knows exists in a parent or teacher who opposes what one wishes, but says nothing about it—just sulks and opposes!

It must have taken an hour to reach the place where Norman Draw merged with Toler Draw. My left hand found it. I turned into it, memories of old terrors flooding back. Here at this place I had often stood for what seemed hours, mustering up courage to travel into Norman Draw.

I had that same reluctance now, multiplied by the years since I had been a six year old. But I set out. I had fixed in my mind, from the microseism, just where we would face the mounded breast of the hill which we could no longer see, might never see again if we did not conquer the smut, and I held steadily on the tiring course until we reached it—and I visualized it in mind from old memory. It was in the area where badgers multiplied through the years, where literally scores of their burrows led back into the side of the hill, where mounds covered areas of fifty feet per burrow.

I faced the side of the hill, stood very still. The others came up and I knew they formed to my right and left, by the way the segments of rope pulled against the back of my diving suit.

Out of those holes, I was sure—smut was pouring like water from a big hose under

high pressure! That was just a feeling I had, based on sensitivity, and a steady pushing against my body from head to heels.

I TAPPED the man next to me on my right. We had a fairly good set of pre-arranged signals. This man had a fire-drill, a new government contraption which would eat into almost any metal known as it would eat through air itself. He walked ahead and now I clung to his belt. There was no sound, but he touched me with his elbow when he started using his fire drill. And then the ground ahead of my feet became level and I knew we had started into a stope made by the fire drill.

I extended hands from shoulders. The cut into the hill was about four feet wide, plenty. And soon I had to stand on tiptoe to reach the roof. We ate back under the hill, back under the high field, almost as fast as we could walk. I felt that we had hit the microseism location right on the nose. I tapped again when my feet told me we were in the rock. Almost instantly we slanted downward at a thirty-degree angle. Where we now were we were safe from cave-ins for the moment.

When I estimated that we were perhaps four hundred feet down and five hundred feet back under the hill, I signaled for our lights expert to come forward with his equipment. Mind now, the blazing hell from the fire drill had not been felt by any of us, nor had any of us seen the flames. Nor had we felt the heat along the shaft where much of the stone must have been close to molten.

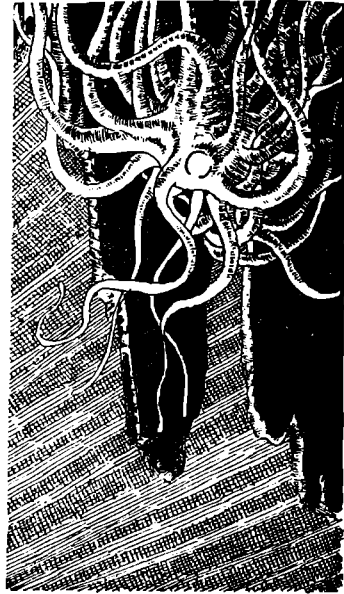
But when we stopped abysmal cold began to seep through our thick diving suits! One second and they were almost unbearably hot for their own sakes; then the coldness came in and two terrific emotions rose in me at the same time: fear and excitement.

I knew the others felt it also because we closed in to touch one another and both the fear and excitement were communicated through our contacting hands. Also, we all wished to go on and on.

My fire-drill man traveled more slowly. My lights expert had tried to pierce the gloom with his lights with utterly no effect whatever. Now, suddenly, my fire-drill man stopped, tapped me again. He stood, his

tapping indicated, inside the cavern! He fumbled forward and I had a chance to marvel at the miracle of mathematics; we had struck the cavern at its base level!

The cold was even more intense. I took the lead now, feeling my way with my feet, not wishing to step into a bottomless pit. I still moved with that effortless by which we had made progress through the smut outside. And on a sudden hunch I moved toward the feeling of greatest cold. If the smut-entities were averse to cold, if



we entered areas where it was great enough we would be free of them! So I reasoned, if a fifteen-year-old can pride himself on reasoning.

WHEN I began to stiffen with the cold I came up solid against the acme of cold. I ran my hand over a smooth surface. My hands seemed to freeze against it. I signaled for my lights man. He came forward, switched on his light magic—and for the first time since dropping into the smut-mass we could see! I could see, there in the blackness, all of my companions. They looked like something out of Inferno and no mistake. But when we looked around us and saw into what we had come, nothing human, or made by humans, could ever again look anything but commonplace! How does one

describe something with which one has nothing to compare?

First, the cavern was vast. I knew, all of us knew how it had been formed. Ice from those ancient glaciers had, by glacier action, been wrapped up in dirt, rock, sand, and all the drippings and dregs of the great moraine; the dirt and rock had been churned, crushed, piled hill on hill, until a world of ice was incased in a world of cataclysmic earth. Then, after ages, the ice outside had receded and the dirt and rocks, miles deep all around, had preserved the ice within, like some unbelievable pig-in-a-blanket.

But what had been preserved in the ice itself?

I knew, all of us knew, that the churning I have referred to, the piling of dirt on dirt, rock on rock, hill on hill, to encase the world of ice, *had been deliberate!* We all knew it because our minds had been prepared for it. We knew it before there was any proof. The black face of ice that had been ages old when Lemuria sank beneath the Pacific, stared out at us with baleful eyes. Oh, I know how ice twinkles and stares when it reflects light, but this was different. The "eyes" were so close together, yet each one distinct, and the balefulness so unmistakable, that I began to shiver with something that was not entirely the cold.

We were surrounded by ice. The cavern in which we stood must have been twenty acres in extent. The ice ceiling was a hundred feet overhead. In spite of the cold some sort of melting was taking place in this cavern, slowly, surely, enlarging it.

The floor underfoot was a-crawl! Water, black water, dripped from the roof, seeped endlessly from the entire surrounding wall. Maybe it came out of the floor, too. But on the floor itself, it *moved and grew!*

I knew we stood in one of the birth places, maybe the only one of the smut! The others knew it with me. We stared at one another through our eye-pieces now. The other faces were all reddish in the reflected light, strange, fearful. The stuff on the floor was not ice, but it had just been ice, and it was colder than any ice we knew on the surface. The coldness crept up our feet into our bodies. It had an added coldness, as profound as absolute zero.

I noticed an outward flow from the center of the mass on the floor. I realized that on the floor of this great mysterious cavern the drippings from roof and walls, the seepage, formed in a kind of reserve pool—and then spread slowly, inexorably outward in all directions! I knew what happened after that. Somehow it slid out under the ice, worked its way down into unfrozen soil—then moved up through the interstices of rocks, however solid, up into the clay, the sand, the gravel, then, by capillarity, the soil itself—into the roots of wheat, up to the heads where it appeared as *smut!*

But why this particular manifestation? How had *selection* been made? The choosing of just one particular field, *all* of it, but no more, indicated what Larsen had suggested: intention. But what was the entity or entities that intended?

Were we standing even now inside some laboratory of a far-off forgotten day? The ice was alive, I was sure, frozen solid through the centuries, against a set time of waking! But what was the entity? The frozen part that we regarded as ice? Or the separate portions of it we had first regarded as smut spores or *sori* until Larsen said it was not smut?

I signaled our fire-drill man to use his apparatus on the material on the cavern floor. He blazed his flames upon it. The whole cavern, in the light, looked like some unbelievable hell. But the effect of the fire on the mass was astounding. There was instantly faster movement! The stuff on the floor, without diminishing, began to move faster in all directions, out under the ice, as if the fire gave it new life. I saw, and Larsen saw, and signaled me with his fingers against my suit, that the fire caused the material on the cavern floor to increase. Each "spore," it appeared, divided when touched by the flame, reproducing like the amoeba, by division.

Quickly my man played the flame all around the cavern wall—and before he could turn it off the moving mass on the floor, which had been no higher than our knees, rose to our shoulders! The flame, melting the ice, had released the smut and so quickly that it had almost flooded the cavern. And we had no way, down here, to reverse the process. But the flames were

quickly turned off—in spite of a sudden mental message that came to my mind—and I heard later to the minds of all the others—as if the entire ice face were pleading for more and more of the releasing flame!

I signaled for the fire-drill man to concentrate on a slope cut straight into the ice wall.

He asked by signal if it should be about the same size as that by which we had penetrated the hillside. I nodded. He adjusted his light, played it against the ice face at a spot selected by Larsen.

The flames ate their way in, but it wasn't water that came out of the shaft behind us—it was a steady stream of smut! Our "ice" then, was not ice at all, but the material we had called "smut" frozen solid. And it was sentient. It knew who and what we were. It had known for all the ages of historic man. It communicated with us telepathically somehow! *It? They?* How could we tell? The material was immortal, that was clear—as any cellular thing that reproduces by halving itself is immortal.

WE deliberately drove back into the ice face until we came to solid rock! We must have gone in a mile behind the face of the "ice." I think we all realized that we were thus traveling into the very heart of some antediluvian monster of which no record had previously come down to man in the rocks. This monster, whatever it was, was a community in itself. It was one as a community, one in each of its tiny separate entities—each of which became two at will, to add to the strength and size of the community.

A chill coursed through me as I remembered that man himself is a community—of nobody really knows how many billions of cells. This community could be some weird progenitor of man himself, easily. Else how could twenty of us—nineteen of us scientists including the greatest, Larsen—have been so sure of telepathic communication from It-Them to our brains?

The Thing welcomed the breath of the flame which released it. The dripping from the flame, from the heart of the pack, seemed almost to sing as it flowed back past us, under our feet, to the cavern, there to flow outward and upward to add to the mass

which grew upon the high field, spreading in all directions across Central Washington.

I could just imagine the people on the surface now, noting the increased activity of the smut-mass, wondering what dreadful things were happening to us. We were releasing more of the materials from the elder world, but we did not see how it could be helped. We had to have some idea of this or be utterly defeated at bringing it under control.

But if the ice closed in around us, back there in that tunnel, and our fire-drill suddenly went out of condition! We must all have thought of that at once, for no sooner had realization come than we started backtracking. We could be trapped anywhere between here and the surface! And on the surface the traps were just as thickly set! There was no doubting the danger to us, to our people above, to all the neighboring counties, to the nation, for all we knew.

Nothing could destroy this entity or community of entities; but cold, if sufficiently intense, could immobilize It-Them. Cold was our answer. As we fled back through the tunnel into the great cavern I felt as if the entire pack, with millions of tiny voices, were shrieking silently after me:

"Set me free! Set me free! I will serve you always! You, too, shall be immortal!"

But there was a very human element of stupidity in It-Them, also. For if it had any consideration at all for creatures that were mortal it would certainly not have slain Lonnie Keel and the dozen other human beings the smut-mass had devoured on the surface—and then had any idea that we would listen favorably to It-Them's appeal for release! But the appeal was made. It fled after us, begging, beseeching, promising that immortality which it so plainly knew.

I did not care for its immortality, however, nor just then did my co-workers. For It-Them's immortality had kept it locked underground, like some monstrous black Prometheus chained, for ages mankind could scarcely count. Was immortality worth such restrictions?

I KNEW then the solution to the smut-mass, a solution that was only temporary, that must be kept active to the end of man's life on earth if black Prometheus were to

remain chained and thus deterred from possessing the globe.

Engineers who had worked on Grand Coulee Dam were among my nineteen co-workers and I felt sure the idea would have occurred to them also—they had used it on the east bank of the Columbia where briefly, it flowed into the north. It would work here in Norman Draw and Toler Draw. It had to, or who could say how far the doom we had released from the old moraine, in the high field above it, would eventually extend?

V

SUCH BITTER COLD

WE HAD one very obvious and highly dangerous duty to perform before we returned to the surface. Doing it would release more and more of the queer black hell-harvest, but if we didn't find out the truth it wouldn't matter much how little or extensively we freed the smut. In a short time it would possess the world anyway, limited, I supposed, only by the food it would need while "alive," while not frozen into immobility. Our duty was to find out something of the limits of the underground smut field, to check against later efforts of our seismologists.

So we started just inside the cavern, where the tunnel by which we had entered it from the surface was running almost full of the smut, and made a tunnel against the solid rock, behind the "ice," to see whether there were branching caverns—to find out, in short, whether this cavern was the only pocket of It-Them, or whether it might not be that all the land under what had once been fields of ancient ice, from side to side of the continent, was inhabited by It-Them! The stuff might never be released within the lifetime of man. It might be released everywhere simultaneously, by tomorrow morning! We must be prepared. It was our duty to take risks.

So behind the eating flames which released more and more of the ebon horror, we followed the rock face around the inside of the cavern. We learned that there were scores of branching tunnels and caverns, each one tightly packed with the black ice!

Some sort of message, some sort of map-

ping job must be done to assist the seismologists. I was the only one of those twenty who could return to the surface with any chance of finding my way back. So I went out alone, sick with fear, to the surface. There I procured three sticks of dynamite, fused, capped, spoke briefly to the seismologists, did not take time to explain, and returned to my co-workers in the cavern.

In the cavern we took fresh risks, risks that one or all of us might be crushed by the falling in of the cavern roof. We set off one of the sticks of dynamite at each of three most widely separated points in the cavern. These little explosions, shaking the earth, would reach each seismograph on the surface and write its wave-record thereon. Those who knew how to read the jiggings would know, then, how far the explosion waves of each of the three had traveled to each seismograph, through what media it had traveled—whether rock, clay, sand, gravel or ice!—and a complete map could be made of the dwelling places of It-Them, across all the vast North American Moraine! Thus only could the world protect itself against what we had first known as smut.

Well, then we came out, and I waited, as a youngster should, for science itself to provide what seemed to me to be the only answer. Here it is: During the building of the Grand Coulee Dam, millions of tons of material poured into the hole where the engineers were trying to build an abutment. The material came from the hill on the eastern bank of the river. It could not be removed as fast as it slid into the pit.

So engineers had simply driven pipes into the mountainside, attached them to a special refrigeration plant—and frozen the mountain solid! Here, however, we must freeze the hill solid and keep it thus frozen through the ages. If ever alertness relaxed we were done!

I WAITED for somebody, probably Larsen, to say what we should do, after we came out of that cavern, reported to our people, to newspaper reporters and thus to the world, what we had found. Our seismologists were already studying the records of our three cavern-explosions.

Toler Draw and Norman Draw were both filled with smut when we came out.

The stuff had pushed its fighters back more than five miles in all directions during the time we were down there in the cavern.

When we had done, I waited, and Larsen, grinning at me, said: "I suppose you know the answer, kid?"

I felt shy about the whole thing. "Grand Coulee Dam," I offered, "but *you* know; it's better, coming from you!"

Well, then Larsen told them, and before that same day was ended scores of gallant engineers had gone down into the smut, down into Toler and Norman Draws, to turn the high field and all the land under it, into a gargantuan refrigerator capable of delivering nearly absolute zero cold.

It was easy to tell when they began making cold, for the smut ceased its advance. Then it began to retreat! Its retreat was faster even than its outward charge had been from the moment we began releasing it with the combined harvester, then with the fire Karl Orme had set in the wheat, then with our fire-drill in the cavern.

But not all the ebon horror got back into

the cavern-sanctuary before the hillside-refrigerator was completely efficient and operative. A field of it, varying in thickness from inches to feet, covered the high field like a cooling lava flow—a constant threat, a constant reminder, to those who knew.

Scientists often stopped along the road past my Uncle's place, to take note of the ebon blanket over the now useless high field. Invariably they said to Uncle Charles, somewhat loftily:

"Volcanic action here, ages ago! That's black basalt!"

Uncle Charles always widened his eyes as with great surprise.

"I wonder," he invariably answered. "what makes it so cold you can't cross it without freezing?"

They always had some learned explanation. Everybody always had explanations for everything. Only the army of seismologists which planted its seismographs across the North American Moraine offered no explanations of their work. They **knew** the truth would certainly be laughed to scorn.