

Weird Tales

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Published monthly by the Popular Fiction Publishing Company, 2467 E. Washington Street, Indianapolis, Ind. Entered as second-class matter March 20, 1923, at the post office at Indianapolis, Ind., under the act of March 3, 1879. Single copies, 25 cents. Subscription, \$2.50 a year in the United States, \$4.00 a year in Canada. English office: Charles Lavell, 18, Serjeant's Inn, Fleet Street, E. C. 4 London. The publishers are not responsible for the loss of unsolicited manuscripts, although every care will be taken of such material while in their possession. The contents of this magazine are fully protected by copyright and must not be reproduced either wholly or in part without permission from the publishers.

NOTE—All manuscripts and communications should be addressed to the publishers' Chicago office at 840 North Michigan Avenue, Chicago, Ill.

FARNSWORTH WRIGHT, Editor.

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Contents for February, 1932

Cover Design.....	C. C. Senf
<i>Illustrating a scene in "The Devil's Bride"</i>	
The Eyrie.....	148
<i>A chat with the readers</i>	
The Devil's Bride (Part 1).....	Seabury Quinn 152
<i>A tale of devil-worship, that contains horror, thrills, shudders, breath-taking interest, suspense, and vivid action</i>	
Night and Silence.....	Maurice Level 175
<i>A new and grimly powerful short story by a great French master of the weird tale</i>	
The Three from the Tomb.....	Edmond Hamilton 178
<i>A dramatic thrill-tale about three millionaires, dead and buried for months, who reappeared among the living</i>	

[CONTINUED ON NEXT PAGE]

- Devouring Shadows**-----**N. J. O'Neil** 198
An arresting weird-scientific story of shadows from the fourth dimension that descended in force upon our world
- The Thing on the Roof**-----**Robert E. Howard** 213
A shuddery tale of an old, legend-haunted tomb in Honduras, and the doom that pursued the man who opened it
- The Tree-Men of M'Bwa**-----**Donald Wandrei** 220
A startling story of Africa, strange monstrosities, and the weird power of the Whirling Flux
- The Gallows Tree**-----**Otis Adelbert Kline** 227
Verse
- The Laughing Duke**-----**Wallace G. West** 228
A romantic story of the eery revenge of Florian, Duke of Orstow, in the days of the robber barons
- The Haunted Chair (Conclusion)**-----**Gaston Leroux** 242
A novel of eery murders, strange assassinations and weird adventures, by the author of "The Phantom of the Opera"
- The Horror in the Hold**-----**Frank Belknap Long, Jr.** 259
A tale of the old adventurous days when Spain and England fought for the supremacy of the seas
- Weird Story Reprint:**
- The Wolf-Leader (Part 7)**-----**Alexandre Dumas** 265
A werewolf story by a great French novelist, which does not appear in his collected works in English
- Dream Justice**-----**E. W. Mayo** 287
A brief tale, about a man who dreamed that he committed a murder, and the startling result of his dream

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Devouring Shadows

By N. J. O'NEAIL

A story of weird shadows from the fourth dimension, that descended upon our world to wipe it clean of life

HOW, or why, should I begin a statement of such a nature as this—a chronicle probably the most vital in the history of the human race; and yet one which, if so, can probably never be read by human eye; which, in fact, if ever so read, must stand self-confuted, the frenzied product of a madman's brain?

It is strange, that in the face of so overwhelming, so inescapable a horror, I should turn almost mechanically to pen and paper, as though by sharing my fears I should halve their intensity, or lighten the burden of numbing horror which weighs upon my soul. Should I not rather be upon my knees, in supplication to my Creator? Or is it blasphemy to dream that any plea of mine, or of any human creature, could avert the looming, inevitable cataclysm?

In any event, it is to my tablets that I have turned, like Hamlet, in a frenzied hope to face what may befall, with a sane mind. And there remains always the bare possibility that this record may yet be read—perhaps by eyes of which this world has never dreamed.

It is by agreement with Parfitt that I have undertaken so to apply my few remaining hours—Parfitt, who first, I believe, of any upon earth sensed the appalling truth; or he, at any rate, who first unfolded the vision to my shuddering and recoiling mind.

It is less than a week since the shadows beneath whose pall we cower today, like chickens when a hawk far overhead casts its black outline upon the ground—first fell like the nebulous, menacing tentacles

of some cosmic monster, upon an unsuspecting earth.

It was upon a sunny June morning, when the scents of early summer languorously filled the air, and the placid buzzing of a bee outside my window came to my ears above the hubbub of the street traffic below, that the first inkling of the horror came to me—through the columns of my morning newspaper:

SOLID SHADOWS
FALL ON LONDON;
MYSTIFY SAVANTS

LONDON, June 6—Meteorologists, astronomers and scientists confess themselves completely mystified by unique shadow formations, which fell over London yesterday.

The peculiarity lies in the fact that the shadows appear to possess depth, in place of the flatness of an ordinary shadow; that is, they are patches of darkness, not only lying upon the ground or on whatever surface they fall, but rising upward from it for a height of several feet, as though they were solid substances.

There was considerably more to the dispatches, detailing the prevalence of the shadows throughout the English capital. Apparently they had first been observed in Trafalgar Square, near Nelson's monument, and had spread thence until by evening virtually the whole city was knee-deep in the mysterious "solid shadows."

Each shadow was described as being nearly one hundred yards in length, several yards in width and rising from the surface on which it fell, for several feet. They were irregular and indistinct in outline, but all were practically identical in general shape and size. *And in no case was any actual object visible which might have cast such a shadow.*

There were also interviews with a num-

ber of scientists, who confessed themselves unable to explain the phenomenon. Some spoke vaguely of some atmospheric abnormality which might produce such an eccentric obscuration of the sunlight; some tried—rather feebly, I thought—to trace a connection with a recent outbreak of sun spots; and some inclined to the view that the "shadows" were some unusual fog formation, although June is far removed from London's foggy season, and the weather had been warm and dry.

The phenomenon was of only passing

interest to me, although it occurred to me as I finished reading, that Parfitt—Roger Middleton Parfitt, former professor of astronomy and physics in Columbia University, and now engaged in private research—would find in it an irresistible challenge, and that he would be capable of plucking the heart from its mystery, if any man were.

In that I was all too correct, as subsequent events established. Meanwhile, however, the matter escaped my mind until twelve hours later, when a flaring



"In the wake of that annihilation had come swiftly and inevitably an inferno of chaos."

black headline in an evening newspaper, caught my eye:

PANIC SPREADS AS MYSTERY SHADOWS SHROUD ALL EUROPE

Beneath were dispatches telling of the appearance of the mysterious shadows in practically every country of Europe, as well as over the whole of the British Isles. They had risen like a tide of darkness over every capital, every city of any magnitude, and thousands of smaller communities. Panics were reported in several rural sections of France, Italy and the Balkan nations, where the populace had been terror-stricken by the phenomenon.

In some places, the shadows had become visible with the first rays of sunrise; in others they had fallen at intervals during the day. In every case, however, they were motionless, and identical in size and outline with those which had first appeared in London. And as before, nothing was visible which might have caused them.

There were columns of interviews now, with practically everyone whom the press could by any stretch of the imagination term "scientists," although I looked in vain for any statement from Parfitt. And the majority of the interviews were meaningless, for everyone admitted inability to fathom the mystery. The theories of "air streaks," sun spots and fog were all re-threshed. One eminent physicist advanced the possibility of the earth's having passed through the gaseous tail of some other astral body, and of patches of the vapor having clung to it. Another anonymous authority pinned his faith to some mysterious, sunlight-repelling rays emanating from within the earth. Another commentator ventured the argument that the sun's heat was dying out, and that this in some unexplained manner produced the phenomenon. Even more fantastic was the suggestion—possibly the product of a

newspaperman's imagination—that the shadows were caused by a fleet of airplanes, constructed of some invisible material; a theory which, apart from its extravagant improbability, offered no explanation of the so-called solidity of the shadows, which was their peculiarity.

The thing was of increasing, but still only casual, interest to me—but next morning the ominous shadow bands fell upon North America.

DREAMS in which intangible things clutched at me like a nebula of doom had broken my sleep, and I awoke slowly, to a vague consciousness of oppression, which was more physical than mental. I naturally set the sensation down to the effect of my dreams; and then, as the last mists of slumber cleared from my mind, I suddenly stared aghast.

The clean, clear sunlight streamed through the upper half of my bedroom window, but the lower half was obscured as though by a volume of black mist, which crept across the floor, up the side of my bed, and lay full across my chest, terminating on the inner wall of the room.

I raised myself in bed and stared at the puzzling obscuration. It was just as described in the cabled reports: an apparent shadow formation, which possessed volume, instead of mere surface area. Its outline was at once vague and yet clearly defined; that is, I could not distinguish its actual shape, but I could see clearly that it was a coherent formation, divided distinctly from, and not merging gradually with, the sunlight above it.

It was black and opaque, like an ordinary shadow falling upon an ordinary surface. I thrust my hand into it, and saw that it was partly obscured, but still visible, just as though I had laid it upon the surface of an ordinary shadow.

Whatever might be the explanation of

the phenomenon, I was satisfied already that it could not be that of fog. My hand encountered no sensation of dampness, or of cold or warmth; and no fog could retain such coherent form in such juxtaposition to clear morning sunlight.

I crossed from my bed to the window, and gazed outside. The formation appeared to bend at right angles, like a stove-pipe elbow. It lay like the trunk of a tree, against the outer wall of the building, and at the street level ran across the road. Whatever caused it, had it been a normal shadow, should have been visible over the roof of the apartment house opposite; but nothing which could have accounted for it met my eyes.

Now for the first time I became conscious that the nebulous formation which had entered my room was but one of a multitude. Similar solid black streaks crossed and recrossed the street at frequent intervals. Some lay across the roofs of buildings, and others climbed their walls. Ordinary shadows were visible on the street, also, and beside them the other formations appeared like bloated monstrosities from some nether world.

Even as I finished dressing, the newsboys in the streets below were crying the first extra editions of the afternoon newspapers, which were almost inarticulate in their efforts to broadcast the phenomenon. For the shadows had fallen, not only over the whole of New York, but over almost every other center in the eastern half of North America; and, as the day progressed, they swept westward in pace with the progress of the sun.

STILL struggling against the vague forebodings which clutched at my mind, I hastened to the penthouse laboratory which Parfitt occupied, on the roof of a skyscraper near the water's edge. I found my friend wan-eyed, at a desk littered, as

was the floor for yards about, with paper, scribbled with unintelligible mathematical formulæ.

"Parfitt," I exclaimed, almost in the moment that I opened the door, "what on earth do these shadows mean?"

"Hello, Farquhar," Parfitt rejoined in peculiarly listless tones. "As for your question, the only answer I can give you, with all civility, is that it's none of your business."

"I'm sorry if I've intruded," I apologized somewhat stiffly. "But you might at least have asked me a little more politely to get out."

"Sit down," my friend urged. "I assure you, I had no intention of being discourteous."

"I can see you've been rather busy," I conceded.

"Since six o'clock last evening, without food or sleep," he replied casually.

"On—this thing?" I inquired.

"On it—or at least skirting the fringe of it, as near as the human brain can come to the heart of it," Parfitt answered.

"Then you know, or suspect, the cause?"

"Yes," he replied. "It isn't the cause that's the problem; it's the effect—and the remedy—that are beyond us."

"Then what on earth is it?" I insisted.

"It is probably nothing on earth—in the sense that we are on earth," my friend rejoined.

"You're not suggesting that it is a supernatural manifestation of some kind?" I ejaculated.

"Supernatural—I don't know," the astronomer confessed. "It's certainly supernatural, at least. I told you a few moments ago it was none of your business, Farquhar. I'll take that back. You're a man of sound nerves, and of better than average intelligence; perhaps the truth won't alarm you. The fact is that we are

witnessing for the first time, I think, in human history, an active manifestation from the fourth dimension."

"Just what do you mean by the fourth dimension?" I demanded.

"That I don't know," Parfitt admitted. "We haven't got much nearer an understanding of it, since Einstein propounded his theory, nearly fifty years ago—back in the first quarter of the Twentieth Century. But the scientific world has come to accept, almost as it accepts that two and two always make four, which might be difficult of proof—that there is a fourth dimension; and very possibly a fifth, and perhaps many more."

"But what have these shadows to do with the fourth dimension?" I persisted.

"Isn't it obvious?" my companion countered. "Of course, we have lived so long in a three-dimensional world that it is difficult to conceive of any other. For instance—can you conceive of a two-dimensional object?"

"In theory, certainly," I replied. "As a concrete object, it is more difficult. Even a sheet of paper, of course, has three dimensions. It is hard to visualize an object of only two."

"What about—a shadow?" my companion suggested.

Now, for the first time, a glimmering of the truth dawned upon my mind.

"A shadow, I grant you, has no thickness," I admitted. "In that sense it is two-dimensional. But it is not an object; it is merely the absence of direct light upon a surface."

"True," Parfitt nodded. "A shadow is not an object. It is, we might say, a reflection—but it is the reflection of a three-dimensional object.

"Now today, the greater part of the world's surface, probably, is dotted with shadows which have, apparently, three dimensions, instead of two. Is the infer-

ence not inescapable? A two-dimensional shadow, a three-dimensional object; a three-dimensional shadow, a four-dimensional object."

"But, good heavens!" I exclaimed. "What do they mean? And what causes them?"

"Your first question, no one can answer," Parfitt replied. "Perhaps it is as well. Your second, I thought I had answered; they are caused by objects or beings, in the fourth dimension."

"But where are those objects, or beings?" I demurred. "If we can see the shadows, why not the original? They must be close at hand, to produce the shadows."

"Again, perhaps it is as well that we can not see them," my companion murmured. "But it is quite possible that the original objects may be near at hand, and yet invisible to us. I do not imply that they are transparent, or anything of that nature, for if so, they would cast little or no shadow. Yet they may be quite near, and yet beyond our range of vision.

"By way of example, take the two-dimensional conception once more. Imagine, if you can, a sentient creature, of two dimensions, living on a surface of two dimensions. It is difficult to conceive, in reality, of such a thing; but, for the sake of argument, let us assume it.

"That creature would be conscious only of two dimensions—let us say, those of length and width. Of height he would have no conception. He might grasp vaguely at the possibility of a third dimension, just as we do of a fourth, but would be unable to visualize it. An object a fraction of an inch above him would be absolutely invisible to him—absolutely beyond his range of vision. Yet he could see a shadow cast by that object upon his surface world.

"Therefore the objects causing these

shadows may be very near and yet beyond our range of vision. On the other hand, they may be distant, not in space, but in time. We know that there is a relation between space and time, in the fourth dimension; therefore, these shadows may come from the past or from the future—much more probably from the future, since there has never been a similar known phenomenon in the past."

By now my brain was reeling with the utter strangeness of the conception which Parfitt's words unfolded. At first I would almost have termed it incredible; and then gradually came the conviction that his theory not only might be possible, but must almost inevitably be the truth.

"And what are the fourth-dimensional objects?" I asked. "Are they animate or inanimate, human, or what?"

"No one can say, as yet," Parfitt answered. "My own impression is that they are probably animate. Such a sudden manifestation, in such numerical strength, seems to indicate a deliberate intent. That they are human, judged by any of our standards, I gravely doubt."

"The shadows are motionless, except that they move in conformity with the movement of the sun," I pointed out. "That might indicate that they are caused by inanimate objects."

"Not necessarily," Parfitt replied. "A period of twenty-four hours may be but a moment in the fourth dimension."

"How do you know that the fourth-dimensional world is inhabited?" I questioned him.

"Mainly by inference," my companion rejoined. "Since the three-dimensional world is inhabited, surely it follows that the four-dimensional world—necessarily a much more complex universe—is, also."

"And by what sort of creatures?"

"No one can say, but probably by beings very different from the human race.

For example, return for a moment to the two-dimensional being which we hypothesized a few moments ago. Imagine what incredible, what incomprehensible monsters we beings of three dimensions must be to him; and the four-dimensional creatures may—in fact, almost certainly would—be equally so to us."

"This is an alarming theory of yours, Parfitt," I gasped. "Imagine the sensation the newspapers would make of it."

"They must never hear of it—unless developments render it absolutely imperative," the scientist declared.

"But what is the meaning of this manifestation?"

Parfitt replied with a weary shrug of the shoulders.

"That is beyond all human conjecture," he confessed. "We have no standard by which to judge it; it is unprecedented in human history. I trust it may prove a friendly one, but, I confess, I have grave misgivings."

"Still more alarming!" I exclaimed. "If it is hostile——"

"If it is hostile," Parfitt replied solemnly, "the world is facing the most deadly peril of its existence. Can you picture the consequences—the physical world which we know utterly at the mercy of creatures which we can not even see, of whose nature and powers we are in utter ignorance?"

"It's a conception too horrible to be faced, Farquhar—and yet it may have to be. That's why I'm pledging you to secrecy. The very suggestion of such a thing might mean madness to the world; and the reality might mean far worse. I've been toiling all night, trying to find a solution, to evolve a formula which would make the fourth dimension visible to our eyes; but all in vain, and perhaps as well, too, for God alone knows what vista of unspeakable horror it might unfold.

"Do you realize, Farquhar, that within the shades of the fourth dimension may lurk all the obscene monstrosities with which the mind of man has peopled the unseen world—all those, and perhaps worse? Suppose that all the hideous deities of a score of pagan mythologies had actual, living prototypes—and there's no proof that they hadn't; the weight of evidence is rather in the other direction, for it isn't logical that the mind of man should conjure such saprophytic blasphemies out of nothing.

"The ancient Egyptians weren't fools, nor the immeasurably more ancient Atlanteans; they had a clearer perception of worlds unseen than we of today, whose eyes are dazzled by the feeble rays of rudimentary, material science. Mankind, in every generation since the mind first functioned, has sensed the actual existence of occult powers of awful potentiality. Sorcerers and demonologists, so called, have trafficked with those powers in every age.

"I'm not an alarmist, Farquhar; I hope and pray that what I've just pictured may not be the truth; but we are confronted, in the words of Grover Cleveland, with a condition, and not a theory. Thus far, I grant you, the shadows have done no harm; they may not do any harm, but some unfathomable purpose must lie beyond their sudden appearance."

PARFITT had no need to caution me to keep so soul-searing a secret; but even without that knowledge, the world that evening lay beneath a pall of apprehension.

By sunset, the shadows had made their appearance on practically every section of the globe. They lay aslant the Rockies, the Andes, and the Himalayas; they traversed the surface of the Sahara Desert, and darkened the midsummer snows as far north as Herschel Island, within the

Arctic Circle. They fell alike on the African veldt and the Australian bush, and even spread their inexplicable lengths upon the waters of the seven seas.

The phenomenon was the feature of the day in the evening newspapers. Cable and telegraphic dispatches from every continent told of its manifestations, and speculated vainly as to the cause. There were reports of panics in half a dozen countries, and as I read them, I realized, more even than before, the necessity for the secrecy which Parfitt had impressed upon me. If the mere appearance of the shadows had power to rouse such alarm in human breasts, to what abysses of madness and despair might a realization of what they really portended lead?

In the Transylvania region of Rumania, peasants by thousands had fled from the fields, proclaiming that the end of the world was at hand. Many had fired their homes, and military forces were on guard in half a dozen centers against possible outbreaks of terrorism or sabotage.

In France and Austria also, the peasants were flocking to the cities, although in more orderly manner. From China and Tibet came word of weird rites performed in Buddhist temples and monasteries. In India, scores of natives hurled themselves into the Ganges, and from the interior of Africa came ominous rumors of human sacrifices offered up to strange and almost forgotten tribal gods.

There were other demonstrations of alarm in the Latin-American republics, and in some sections of England and the United States also. Both scientists and government officials, however, published assurances that there was no cause for alarm in the situation. While admitting their inability to explain the shadows, they insisted that these must be of some natural origin, and that there was no reason to believe that they portended disaster of any nature.

Experiments conducted in a dozen different centers, in an effort to determine the nature and cause of the shadows, brought no results but negative ones, which resulted in the shattering of most of the theories previously advanced. Scientists satisfied themselves that the phenomenon was not produced by fog, mist or emanations of any known ray or radio-active disturbance; nor could any abnormal conditions be detected in the atmosphere.

It is the natural tendency of the human mind, however, to shrink always from the unknown, and all assurances as to the non-existence of danger failed to allay a growing sense of disquietude. Night-fall, bringing with it the obliteration of the shadows, came as a welcome temporary respite; for to many, ostrich-like, it appeared that since the shadows were no longer visible, they were no longer in existence.

One point impressed itself upon me that night—namely, that no three-dimension shadows were cast by electric lights or other forms of artificial illumination. I could not bring myself to believe that the silent watchers from the unseen world had actually departed with the coming of darkness; therefore, I reasoned, they were probably beyond the radius of man's artificial luminances.

Next morning, however, the shadows were in evidence once more in identically the same positions as twenty-four hours earlier, which would have strengthened my belief that they were caused by inanimate objects, were it not for Parfitt's assurance that time, as measured in our world, might be a negligible element in the realm of the fourth dimension.

And now came swift and sudden confirmation of his prediction; for a cable, received in New York at ten a. m., brought tidings which struck fresh dread to human hearts throughout the world.

The shadows were in motion, in London—"advancing like a phantom legion upon the city," as one writer, who had unwittingly plumbed nearer to the truth than he realized, phrased it.

Like sinuous serpents, they were gliding silently, but therefore the more ominously, over the capital of the British empire. The movement was not co-ordinated, or in unison; the shadows drifted in various directions, as though each were indeed the reflection of a conscious entity. Within an hour, every surface in London, whether vertical or horizontal, was a-shimmer with the creeping black patches, which frequently crossed and blended together, like rivulets converging in a common stream.

They writhed in sinister silence alike across the historic pavement of Whitehall and through the most leprous lanes of Limehouse; tossed upon the surface of the Thames as it lapped at the wharves of Wapping, circled the mighty dome of St. Paul's and scaled the walls of Buckingham Palace, where the octogenarian monarch, Edward VIII, had died three months before, and where his niece Elizabeth today reigned, as had another queen of that name four centuries before.

And now, many observers claimed to discern in the outline of the moving shadows a grotesque, but still visible, resemblance to the human form. Magnified and distorted though they were, their manner of movement was roughly comparable to the stride of a bipedal being; and occasionally, from the main bulk of the blackness, a pseudopod-like length of shade swung suddenly out, as might an arm attached to a body. Other onlookers disputed the resemblance and set it down as mere imagination, inspired by the fact that the shadows were moving.

The wave of apprehension which had swept the world in the preceding forty-eight hours now clutched more firmly at

London's heart. The venerable prime ministress, Dame Megan Lloyd George, issued a proclamation in which she counseled the nation against alarm or hysteria; but the unrest spread, particularly among the Oriental colonies of the east end, where there were violent outbreaks of suicide, mutilation and unnamable rites and orgies.

I SOUGHT Parfitt out that night, and found him as though he had not moved from his desk in the last thirty-six hours. He was more wan and haggard than on the preceding day, and the litter of paper now carpeted the entire room.

"It's no use, Farquhar," he groaned. "I've tried every known formula and angle, and developed a dozen new ones, but they all fall short. The damnable thing seems to hover illusively, maddeningly, just beyond my reach, just round the corner from human eyesight and human understanding. If I could only turn that corner——"

"You're overdoing this task, Parfitt," I cautioned him. "I don't know just what you're groping for——"

"Nor do I," he exclaimed. "That's the agony of it. 'Groping' is the word—groping into blackness more unfathomable than those damned shadows. What I'm seeking is some channel of communication with the unseen world—some means of peering into the fourth dimension and seeing what all this means. But I fear it's futile. As I said yesterday, our two-dimensional man, with his two-dimensional brain, couldn't be expected to visualize the actual nature of the third dimension; and we, I suppose, are limited in turn, in our powers of perception."

"Of course you have seen today's cables——" I ventured.

"Yes, and talked for an hour to Greenwich observatory," Parfitt replied.

"Does this strengthen your belief that

the shadows are those of living creatures?" I asked.

"Yes," he answered, "although I had little doubt of it before. Therefore, to that extent, there is nothing additionally alarming in the fact of their being in motion. But there's no doubt that they are spreading panic; and if the mere shadows do that, what will the actual substance do?"

"What do you suggest?"

"I don't know—I'm not sure that I want to know, though I've been toiling for days to do so. And it is more than possible that no one may ever know. I haven't the faintest conception whether the fourth-dimension creatures are human, beast or spirit—although presumably not the latter, since they cast shadows. Of what their coming may mean, I have an idea—one that I dare not divulge, one that it would be futile to divulge; for if it is wrong, it is far better that it never be known; and if it is right, no human power could avert what I fear."

Next morning, the shadows were in motion throughout Europe, and in the late afternoon they commenced to writhe and glide across North America, like the fingers of a giant hand which planned to crush the entire earth within its grasp, as I might crush an egg.

The New World, prepared by the preceding day's tidings from London, gave comparatively little manifestation of increased alarm, although thousands of persons thronged the churches of city, village and countryside, to pray for deliverance from any disaster which might be in store. There were no public services of intercession, however; for the clergy, almost as a unit—and perhaps feigning a confidence which they lacked inwardly, in order to reassure the public—refused to recognize the shadows as a source of even potential peril.

Again the newspapers were filled with columns of fruitless speculation as to the significance of the newest manifestation; but I noted that there was no suggestion even faintly resembling that which, on Parfitt's assurance, I believed to be the truth. Practically all scientists of any repute confessed themselves completely mystified; although some, I believe, by now must have grasped the meaning of the menace, as Parfitt had done, but refrained, as he did, from confiding so soul-searing a secret to the world at large—even though the onrushing culmination of that secret was then only a few hours distant.

At midnight I stood with Parfitt, gazing from his observatory window upon the throbbing city's night life, far below, where millions pursued the path of pleasure, either heedless of the shadow menace, or else seeking forgetfulness. A myriad pinpoints of light outlined faintly the lower thoroughfares along which motor cars sped, and the elevated paths above, reserved for pedestrians. On the right, a luminous aurora rose from Broadway's kaleidoscope. From the distance came the hoarse siren of a steamer somewhere in the sound, and overhead an occasional airplane hovered like a droning firefly.

The very familiarity of the scene seemed, somehow, to reassure me against the nebulous forebodings which had assailed my mind for days. It was impossible to conceive of any serious disaster intruding upon a world so firmly founded as ours.

At that moment, Parfitt was speaking: "Sir Jason Singleton, director of the Greenwich observatory, is to call me early in the morning—within two or three hours. I sounded him on the subject yesterday, and he appears to have formed the same conclusions as myself. We must

watch London, for it is reasonable to assume that future developments will occur there first, as they have in the past."

IT WAS three o'clock in the morning—eight o'clock by Greenwich time—when the call light upon the radiophone apparatus in the laboratory flashed alternately blue and red—London's call signal. Parfitt was at the phone instantly, simultaneously pressing the button which completed the television circuit, so that upon the screen that stood against the wall, I beheld the bearded figure of Sir Jason Singleton, seated at his desk.

Although television has been in practical use for nearly forty years, never have I seen an apparatus which functioned so perfectly as Parfitt's. I could detect every movement of the British astronomer's lips, could almost read the words which they framed, as clearly as though he sat before me in the flesh, instead of being three thousand miles distant.

From Parfitt's words I realized that he and Singleton had exchanged views, and that they were in agreement. Then, as I watched, I became aware that a shapeless black outline—one of the shadows—had stretched serpent-like across the British scientist's desk, apparently penetrating through a window which was beyond the radius of the television apparatus.

Sir Jason had apparently asked what steps could be taken to face the situation, for I heard Parfitt reply:

"What steps are possible? How can we act against a danger, of the very nature of which we are unaware? How can we conjecture when or where or how it will strike——"

And at that instant it struck.

At the recollection of those first few, soul-shattering seconds of horror, I still quiver as I write. For in a twinkling, as I gazed upon the television screen, I be-

held a sudden movement of the shadow-mass on the Englishman's desk. It seemed to coil itself, tentacle-like, about his figure, and in the flashing of an eye Sir Jason Singleton had vanished, as though obliterated by a giant eraser.

Parfitt had seen the thing, even as I had; for as I sprang from my chair with an ejaculation of horror on my lips, he was calling hoarsely into the radiophone:

"Singleton—Singleton! Where are you, man? For God's sake, speak to me—the world's safety depends on it!"

Dazed at the suddenness of what I had beheld, I stared over his shoulder at the television screen. The interior of Sir Jason's office was clearly visible. The chair in which he had sat was unmoved; the radiophone stood upon his desk, the ear-phones still swaying from whatever force had torn them from Singleton's head. But the scientist himself had vanished, and with him, the shadow.

Now Parfitt was tearing at the dials and switches of the radiophone, in a frenzy that seemed half madness and half despair, still calling incoherently upon Singleton. When he finally thrust the apparatus aside and rose to face me, his face was ashen with the anguish of a man who has read, not alone his own death sentence, but that of a world.

"It's come, Farquhar," he said dully. "I didn't foresee that it would come in this form; but then, who could?"

"In God's name," I ejaculated, "what has happened, and what does it mean?"

"The creatures of the fourth dimension have struck—and it means the world's doom," Parfitt answered. "You saw what happened? Singleton was snatched out of sight, as though by a giant, invisible hand—snatched not only out of sight, but out of all human ken—snatched, in short, into the fourth dimension."

"What will become of him?" I demanded.

"How can we tell?" my companion groaned. "It may be immediate annihilation—some horrible metamorphosis—anything. But it's not Singleton alone. The creatures of the fourth dimension haven't singled out one man for their attack, be assured of that. They may have struck at hundreds—millions! They may have wiped out all England, and may be advancing on us at this very moment—a shadow army that will devour the world."

The contemplation of such a crushing, cosmic catastrophe seemed somehow to chill me less than the sight of Singleton's disappearance had done. It may be that the first shock had numbed my mental consciousness, or it may be that my mind recoiled from the effort to envision a doom so all-devouring as that which Parfitt's words foretold.

"This is what I have vaguely feared since the first appearance of the shadows," my companion went on. "You may say it was my duty to warn the world—but of what use would such a warning have been? What means of defense can we take against such a foe which we can not even see, a foe which reaches out from the infinity of a dimension beyond our ken, to wipe our race from the earth? Even now, when we know how it has struck, when we know that it may strike again at any moment, what can we do?"

"We can not flee from the shadows, for they are everywhere—and understand, of course, that it is not the shadows themselves, but the beings which cause them, that are the menace. We might hide from the shadows by immuring ourselves in rooms or caverns where no sunlight could penetrate; but we can not hide from the fourth-dimensional beings themselves. We can not even fortify ourselves against them. They, presumably, can enter a

locked room, through the medium of the fourth dimension, as easily as we could step into a two-dimensional plane through the medium of the third dimension—that is, from above it.”

With a sudden gesture of determination he turned again to the radiophone, and for several minutes dialed frenziedly; then he turned to me once more.

“I can’t raise London,” he said, tonelessly. “Cullinan, Bywater, Hereward-Evans—none of them answers.”

A call to the government radio bureau confirmed our worst fears. All wireless communication with London had been mysteriously and abruptly severed, shortly after three a. m.; and simultaneously even the now almost-obsolete undersea cables had suddenly “gone dead.” Britain’s capital was isolated from the world overseas.

And so, upon an unsuspecting world, the blow which Parfitt, and perhaps others, had foreseen but had been powerless to avert, had fallen.

UPON the numbing agony of the next few hours of darkness, as Parfitt conferred frantically with scientists of three continents, I can not dwell; for already I have lingered too long upon this history, and my labors, futile, probably, in any case, must necessarily be so, unless I complete them before the blow falls here.

All of Parfitt’s calls to London were unavailing, but he finally succeeded in communicating with two Scottish physicists, the pallor of whose horror-stricken visages was apparent even on the television screen. And not without reason, for the story which they unfolded to us, across three thousand miles of space, was one of stark, blood-chilling terror, such as human ears had never heard before.

In a word, the city of London, with its twenty million inhabitants, had been

wiped clean of human life, so far as outside observations could reveal; and, more, lay at that moment in the grip of a holocaust of destruction more ruthless even than that through which it had passed in the world war of 1947.

There had been no word of warning, not even time for panic; in the twinkling of an eye, apparently, the hovering shadows had snatched twenty million human beings out of visible existence, as though they had been drawn relentlessly into the maw of a gigantic vacuum. From homes and offices and streets and moving vehicles alike, every living soul had been torn, seemingly by ruthless, unseen hands.

And in the wake of that annihilation, the most incredible in human history, had come swiftly and inevitably an inferno of chaos. Motor cars by hundreds of thousands, speeding along thousands of streets, became unguided juggernauts of destruction as the controlling hands vanished from their wheels; they crashed and collided with one another, and spread sheets of flaming gasoline on roadway and sidewalk.

A half-dozen airplanes, left suddenly pilotless in midair over the city, hurtled in flames to earth. Railway trains leaped their tracks and piled masses of tangled steel wreckage on every side. Boilers left untended in a hundred factories burst in belching eruptions of destruction; elevators crashed, and scores of towering structures already lay leveled in ruins. A score of barges ran amok upon the Thames, shattered themselves against its piers or against one another, and vanished beneath its waters.

And, following closely on that deluge of devastation, terror had swept like wildfire throughout the British Isles. In the streets of virtually every town and city, mobs ran rampant; some calling upon all they met to kneel and await the end of

the world in prayer; others proclaiming an orgy of carousal and debauchery; and many seeking the nearest means of self-destruction.

With its royal family and the heads of its government wiped out of existence, the nation lay for the moment as though paralyzed beneath the blow which had struck it. A half-dozen cabinet ministers chanced to be absent from London, however, as Parliament was in the middle of its Whitsuntide recess; and these, under the leadership of Sir Fulford Treleaven, chancellor of the exchequer, summoned an emergency council of state in Liverpool, in a determined effort to face the crisis.

Martial law was proclaimed throughout the country, and every available military unit was mobilized and dispatched to strategic points, in an effort to restore order. Rigid censorship was imposed upon telephones, telegraphs, cables and radiophones; and a manifesto was broadcast, calling upon all to remain calm and to "carry on" with the normal affairs of everyday life. Any exodus of refugees from or to any community was forbidden, for fear that congestion in the larger centers might only result in increased panics, and in food shortages. Preparations were made to commandeer all food supplies and to ration them on a wartime basis, if such a step appeared necessary.

Whatever the nature of the disaster which had obliterated all human life from the nation's capital, the manifesto pointed out, there was no certainty that it would strike at other points; and if it did, there was no known means of meeting it; therefore alarms of any nature could only intensify the gravity of the situation.

Even before these precautions could be put into force, however, virtually every roadway throughout the country was black with streams of refugees, country-dwellers

seeking safety in the cities and townspeople hastening to the open spaces.

Thousands who had relatives in London converged upon that metropolis of doom in a frenzied effort to learn the fate of their loved ones. A few entered the city before a military cordon could be thrown about it; entered it, and vanished as had those whom they sought. A venturesome aviator flew over the capital, and his empty plane crashed in a flaming parabola a few minutes later.

Stark, cosmic annihilation had gripped the heart of the British Empire, and no one knew at what moment it might spread throughout the entire world.

"It is probably only a matter of hours, at most," Parfitt assured me. "It was logical that the blow should fall on London first, since the shadows first made their appearance there. It took them thirty-six hours to spread over the world, in the first place; but the interval in which they commenced to move was shorter, and the present interval—the world's last breathing-spell—may prove shorter yet."

IT WAS now only daybreak, but already Parfitt had chartered a special aerocar in which to speed to Washington for a conference with the cabinet.

Never before, in all the world's history, has the sun risen upon such a day as this—the last, in all probability, which human eye shall ever see. The shadows still lay over us, writhing and contorting now like a colossal den of angry serpents; but an even blacker pall of terror and anguish hovered over every heart and mind.

Immediately upon recognizing the extent of the disaster which had overtaken London, the government clapped a ban of censorship upon all radio stations and newspapers throughout the United States; but too late, for already the tidings had spread that London was cut off from the

world, and a score of rumors, all well-nigh as fantastic and alarming as the un-guessed truth, ran like wildfire across the continent; and all seized upon the certainty that there was some deadly connection between the shadows and what had followed.

Parfitt and I, as it chanced, had not been the only eye-witnesses in the United States of the striking of the blow. A radiophone operator in one of the morning newspaper offices, who had been in conversation with his bureau in London, was carried semi-conscious from his machine, babbling deliriously of a black cloud which had engulfed the man with whom he was conversing three thousand miles away. Had the thing occurred during the day, hundreds of eyes must have witnessed it on television screens.

By eight o'clock, the streets of downtown New York were jammed with frenzied men and women, demanding to know the truth. Mobs attempted to fight their way into several newspaper offices and radio stations to obtain information, but were repulsed by the police, reinforced by hastily recruited squads of state troopers.

In the city's foreign districts, pandemonium reigned. Thousands of aliens, of a score of races, assembled in raving, inarticulate groups, and alternately prayed and blasphemed. Several persons were trampled to death in a stampede to enter an East Side church; and an aged woman, screaming for news of her two daughters in London, hurled herself from a tenth-story window.

And the developments of every hour piled fresh fuel upon the flames of panic. By nine o'clock, communication with every point in the British Isles was cut off. Some believed it had been severed as a form of censorship, by the British authorities; but I, with the recollection of what

we had seen still agonizingly fresh upon me, knew otherwise; knew that the horror was spreading, and that all England, Scotland and Ireland were probably, by now, the same smoldering, lifeless shambles that London had become a few hours earlier.

At ten o'clock, Paris failed to respond to the signals of the world; and a few minutes later, sudden, ominous silence cut short radio messages from two steamers and a transatlantic air liner.

At noon, Parfitt returned from Washington, after a two-hour conference with the cabinet, in which he had convinced them of the actual nature of the fate which lies before us, and had offered what suggestions he could—not as to averting the inevitable, but as to the most advisable means of facing it.

And an hour later the President of the United States delivered by radio the most momentous message ever addressed by the chief executive to the nation.

It seemed to me that he had aged ten years in as many hours, as I beheld his face, sunken, set and careworn, on the television screen; seamed, not with personal fear, but with the appalling realization of what lay before his nation and the world.

"Citizens of the United States," his voice came with forced calmness, "the world is faced today with a danger which has never arisen in its history before.

"What that danger is, exactly, we do not know. It is a manifestation beyond human understanding. But it has apparently destroyed all human life in the British Isles, and in other parts of the world. There is grave reason to fear that it may do the same here.

"It is beyond human power to avert the disaster. If it comes, it will come. If we are spared, it will be by the will of God. But nothing can be gained, and much un-

necessary suffering can be caused, by needless panic. In an hour of crisis such as the world has never faced before, my plea to you is—be calm.

"If death comes, there is every reason to believe that it will be instantaneous and painless; a more merciful death than most of us could anticipate in the ordinary course of nature. We can not flee from it; we can best await it in calmness, committing our souls to our Maker, and bearing in mind that 'Cowards die many times before their deaths; the valiant only taste of death but once'."

NEW YORK is as a city of living dead, as I complete these pages. By government decree, transportation and industry have been halted, in an effort at least to avert the chaotic destruction which followed the snuffing out of human life in London—and presumably throughout the Old World; for in the last few hours we have been unable to communicate with any point outside North America.

Not a factory wheel is turning throughout the United States; not an airplane, train or motor car is in motion; every possible fire has been extinguished. Scarcely a footfall sounds upon the streets, for everyone is within his home, in obedience to the president's plea. The panic-stricken mobs have at last been dispersed, and the stillness of the tomb broods already over the city and the nation.

What purpose these precautions can serve is admittedly uncertain; for if man is to vanish from the earth, what matter whether the walls and towers of this mechanical civilization are unimpaired? At least we have done what we can.

I am making six copies of this document, upon parchment, chemically treated to render it more durable. These I shall enclose in hermetically sealed cylinders of ferro-aluminum; and these cylinders I

shall set afloat in the river, if indeed time remains. And thus a record of man's last days upon earth, and of the nature of the end of his reign, may be preserved, for what eyes I know not, to read upon what distant shore I know not.

Upon my desk, and upon the floor, upon the city outside and over all the world, so far as I know, the shadows still writhe as I cease to write. The sun is sinking in an arc of crimson beauty, and with it, the sun of mankind. A faint breeze rustles in the trees, and brings the scents of early summer to my window.

Oh, God, it would be sweet to live!

EPILOGUE

(By *Quarus Nabal*, official astronomer-historian of the planet Mars)

THE voyage to the planet Terrestria, successfully completed last year by the Martian research expedition, confirms the opinion of our scientists that there is no animate life upon that planet, nor has been for centuries.

The expedition, however, uncovered highly interesting — if authentic — evidence that a race of beings of some culture and civilization may once have populated Terrestria. Charred and crumbling ruins of stone and metallic structures, which may once have been the dwelling-places of such beings, were noted; and enclosed in a hermetically sealed cylinder was a document, of which the foregoing is an approximate translation—a translation completed only after twelve months of arduous study, since the document is written in a language and an alphabet entirely foreign to any known here.

Whether this chronicle actually portrays the manner in which life was wiped from the planet must remain in doubt; but the context of the translation is at least consistent with the circumstances under which the document was found.