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LUNAR GUN

by

John L. Chapman

(Author of "Cycle," "In the Earth's Shadow," etc.)

There was a cannon in the center of Tycho and it was pointing directly at the Earth!

THE RUGGED, crust-like surface of the moon was plainly visible in the great 300-inch reflector. The numerous mountains and half-shadowed craters seemed but an arm's length away. The scope was small, showing only a portion of the satellite's bleak face, though that portion wouldn't have been a better view from a hovering space ship.

Brad Graham straightened, relaxing momentarily from the cramped position, then manipulated a tiny, delicate adjustment at his side. He bent forward again, and saw Tycho's jagged shape come into view. He marvelled for a moment at the infinite clearness of the scene. He was proud to be the son of the man who had constructed the 300-inch telescope.

Brad Graham's pride turned, suddenly, to astonishment, for there in the middle of the huge crater, barely visible in the pale light, was the unmistakable glint of metal! Trembling a little, Brad made further adjustments, and the scope increased, bringing the crater to full view.

Brad looked again—and the metal dot had been bisected. There were two distinguishable objects now, situated on a crisp-looking plain that bore signs of inhabitation.

One of the objects was a tiny, dome-shaped building. All around it

the ground was darker than the rest of the plain, proving that the crust undoubtedly was broken under foot. The other object was a black framework, apparently the foundation of a second building. The crust was broken around it also.

Tingling with the thrill of discovery, Brad pressed closer, his unbelieving eyes eagerly studying the bleak lunar scene. It didn't seem possible—he was gazing at a strange, airless body 240,000 miles from the earth, and he was seeing a segment of alien civilization, a product of some other form of life!

Brad called his father and the other members of the observatory staff. All of them took hurried glances and stepped back in amazement. Questions began to fly.

"Moon life!" exclaimed Arthur Graham. "But how does it survive? And what is the purpose—of these domes?"

"The domes are shelter, of course," said Brad excitedly, "and those who live there—must be able to survive without air."

"That's possible," said one of the assistants, "but what about the rest of the race? There are no other domes—nothing like this has been sighted before—so that leaves but one conclusion. If this is intelligent life we see, it probably lives under-

ground! It appears on the surface for a reason. The domes, no doubt, have a special purpose."

"Possibly," said Arthur Graham, "but it's the principle of the thing, gentlemen! We've made a revolutionary discovery—the moon is inhabited!"

TRUE, the earth's pale-faced satellite bore animate existence. This was propounded by extensive observation during the months following the initial discovery. While the amazed scientific world looked on, astronomers trained their telescopes on the rugged globe 240,000 miles distant, watching with intense interest the constructive developments of a yet unseen race.

There in the center of Tycho the black framework which at first appeared to be another dome's foundation grew steadily and took on a strikingly different pattern. As astronomers watched the slow progress, months wore on and soon the framework became a huge metal base. Another building? Observers were certain of it at first, but as work continued on the great black surface, they grew doubtful. The moon people were not constructing another dome, or any other such form of shelter. Their present task involved something much more vast and important. It was important, in view of the slow, precise labor that was administered.

Weeks passed and the metal base acquired a circular cavity in its middle. From the cavity grew a huge, round tube. Another week went by, and the work stopped; no further additions were made to the structure.

Astronomers studied the apparition consistently, and for a number of days no one could offer a sound explanation.

One night when atmospheric conditions were good and visibility was clear, Arthur Graham viewed Tycho for several hours through the 300-inch telescope. No other magnifying instrument would provide a closer view. The two lunar structures seemed but a few miles distant, and to the elder Graham, the purpose in the minds of the moon people suddenly became apparent. The dome was shelter—beyond all doubt. But the other object was distinctly a weapon, a monstrous, sinister gun that was aimed at the earth.

Realization dawned upon the world. Astronomers gazed at Tycho once more and unanimously announced that Graham's supposition was correct. A shocked and unbelieving humanity accepted the warnings of science. Strange, maddened aliens were aiming a tremendous weapon at the earth!

IT WAS like a fantasy; there had been countless stories of cosmic dangers and invasions. For untold centuries the world existed without interference from other worlds. Skepticism had always dominated the possibilities of "life on other planets," "runaway stars," or "invading comets." Such things might occur in the distant future. . . .

There was no mass hysteria. Despite the magnitude of interplanetary hostilities, the situation was received calmly and without furor. The weapon was there on the moon, and if it was intended to send mighty shells at the cities of earth, there was no need for preparation and confusion. The world was defenseless.

Humanity waited.

Consequently, as astronomers had anticipated, the massive barrel on Tycho spouted something black and circular. The concussion was tremen-

dous, for even in the satellite's airless conditions a streamer of flame was visible. Later, there were reports that a wide crack had appeared on Tycho's sun-baked plains.

Days went by, and the black projectile winged its way earthward. Its velocity as well as its size increased day by day.

As it neared the earth, astronomers calculated desperately in an effort to determine where the great shell would fall. Somewhere along the Atlantic coast, they reported, adding that the reports were mere guesses.

Then Arthur Graham made an astounding announcement.

"The projectile," he told the world, "has a greater immensity than previous observation has shown. It is more than a shell. It is a huge bomb of destruction that could wipe out a whole city! But I plead with you—there is a way we can fight it. Due to the shell's size, it's possible for us to do one of two things: Clock its course and explode it with anti-aircraft guns before it lands, or deflect its course entirely and plunge it into the ocean."

A small chance, thought the world, but worth a try. The army set to work, and in a few hours numerous gun bases were established along the coast-line and several miles inland. The projectile from the moon swept downward, met the earth's atmosphere, and plunged for the Carolinas.

Promptly Graham's method of at-

tack was under way. The bomb became visible to the naked eye, and as it rushed earthward, army guns lashed fire into the sky. To explode it or deflect it, Graham had said. Apparently, to do one would be to do the other, but in the hurried moments of ceaseless army gunfire, the chances for a direct hit were very few, and only one was accomplished. The deflection was ever so slight, yet sufficient to send the sinister shell whining into the Atlantic just a few miles off shore. There was no explosion, no cataclysmic sound. Some hours later, a comparatively small tidal wave rushed over the shoreline, and settled.

THE tiny, green-bodied Lunar-ian turned from the dome's lone window, where the immense cannon was visible, and grimly faced a vast gathering of his subjects. The long silence was broken.

"Something has happened to our courageous friends," said the Lunar-ian, "something unexpected has occurred during their momentous undertaking. There has been no reply via ether-wave, nor any sign of them for almost a year. Our attempt at space flight has failed; we must go underground—where we belong." He looked out the window again, at the rising globe of the mother planet. "Three-fourths of it is water," he murmured. "That must be the answer. Or could it be—that they thought our ship was hostile?"

