

SPECIAL MONSTER ISSUE!

SUPER-SCIENCE

APRIL • 35¢

IND

FICTION



VAMPIRES

From Outer Space

BY RICHARD F. WATSON

The Abominable Creature

BY F. X. FALLON

MOURNFUL MONSTER

By Dan Malcolm

SUPER-SCIENCE FICTION

Vol. 3 — No. 3

April, 1959

CONTENTS

NOVELETTES

- MOURNFUL MONSTER** by *Dan Malcolm* 2
A thing of horror! Yet it could think—and feel
- VAMPIRES FROM OUTER SPACE** by *Richard F. Watson* .. 58
The weird seven-foot bats spread fantastic terror

SHORT STORIES

- THE ABOMINABLE CREATURE** by *F. X. Fallon* 36
It was loathsome, vile beyond all endurance!
- THE HUGE AND HIDEOUS BEASTS** by *James Rosenquest* 92
They made men tremble with nightmare fear
- A CRY FOR HELP** by *Eric Rodman* 113
The strange beings could alter a man's brain

FEATURES

- LOOK TO THE STARS** by *Scott Nevets* 57
- NUCLEAR NEWS** by *Steven Rory* 91

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W. W. Scott — Editor

SUPER-SCIENCE FICTION is published bi-monthly by Headline Publications Inc., at 1 Appleton Street, Holyoke, Mass. Editorial office at 1790 Broadway, New York 19, N. Y. Second class postage paid at the post office at Holyoke, Mass. Single copy 35c. Subscription rates, \$4.00 for 12 issues. Not responsible for unsolicited manuscripts, and all such materials must be accompanied by self-addressed, stamped envelopes. All stories printed in the magazine are fiction, and any similarity between the characters and actual persons is coincidental. Copyright 1959 by Headline Publications Inc. All rights, including translation, reserved under International Copyright Convention and Pan American Copyright Convention. Printed in the U.S.A.

THE ABOMINABLE CREATURE

by F. X. FALLON

No living thing as loathsome and vile as this creature had ever been known in the universe before. The horror of its way of life was too much for a human to endure

THE big, beefy man opposite me raised the crystal goblet in one ham-like fist and drained the Martian absinthe fizz in a single thirsty guzzle. On the Lunar colony there are no restrictions on certain liquors as there are on earth, and everything—but everything—is wide open.

Oh well, every man to his own poison. And his vice showed in the ruin of what had once been a strong, intelligent face. Yet, behind the mask of dissipation, I thought I saw something in his eyes—something haunted... Something he would like to push back into oblivion, but could not.

He wiped his mouth on the back of one hairy hand, and with the other hurled the now empty glass against the wall of the private booth. It shattered, and the pieces fell tinkling and added to the growing pile of glittering glass fragments on the floor. A waiter hurried up and obsequiously placed another glass of the green liquor in front of Big Mike Sill, ignoring the broken glass as if it were the most natural thing in the world, and then withdrew silently.

I waited patiently for him to speak. As a young reporter for Interplanetary News Service, I had stumbled on an un-



believable piece of good luck. An interview with Big Mike Sill could make my reputation as a reporter. Here was the man who, two years ago, had suddenly sold out his Museum of All Planets and retired with a fortune that could have paid for the Lunar colony twice over.

The funny thing was that he retired at the height of his success and in the prime of life, and started on his perpetual interplanetary bender, never stopping long in one place, as if he were running away.

IF you've been on Earth in the last five years, you've been to the Museum of All Planets. There have been imitators since, but Big Mike was the first. He paid the best prices for specimens from all the known planets and their moons, and crazy space jockeys competed with each other getting maimed and killed collecting bigger and better horrors for his collections.

You know, people are morbid. The biggest attraction was the giant spider from the forest of Venus' only land mass. You

could always find the biggest crowds around the cage when the keeper dropped a live, kicking slug-beast into the twenty-foot web, and that God-awful hairy body pushed out into the dim light of the cage from its silk-strand-covered hiding place and danced across the thick strands of the web like a ballerina from hell. It took a strong stomach, though, to watch it pounce on the shrilling slug-beast with dripping mandibles and carry it off to be sucked dry in leisure.

The biggest thrill came that day when the giant-sized tarantula became a mother... It seems that the keeper was dropping the daily ration of live meat into the center of the quivering web from the trap-door overhead, when one of the onlookers spotted a movement near the roof of the cage and screamed a warning. It was too late... A *baby* spider with a body about the size of a football, more or less, had managed to climb the iron grillwork where its mother would have been too heavy to pull herself up.

While ordinary civilians

screamed and fainted, and even toughened spacemen turned away and pressed their handkerchiefs to their mouths, the infant sprang on the keeper and fastened itself to his throat. He shouted once, more with surprise than terror, and threw up his hands to ward off the eight-legged monstrosity. He lost his balance and fell, together with the slug-beast, into the center of the web. . .

The mother spider, with maternal restraint, remained in her hidey-hole. Or maybe she just wasn't hungry that day. . . But another dozen of her brood came scampering out of the sack and swarmed over the keeper and the slug-beast, hungry and greedy for their first taste of warm mammalian blood. I guess the bite of the first young one had instantly paralyzed the keeper, for he did not scream again, and his arms and legs jerked more with reflex motion than with conscious struggling. With a dozen of those things draining his blood, it must have been over very fast. At least, I hope so. . .

There was a big scandal about that incident. One of the

partners of the expedition that had brought the giant spider back and sold it to Big Mike, confessed that when they had captured it in its native habitat, they had found the dried-out husk of another, somewhat smaller spider. Any entomologist could have told them that their live specimen was probably a female and, like others of her kind, had made a meal of her spouse after the honeymoon was over. And since it was a fertilized female, a brood would be the next thing. But Big Mike denied that he had been told anything of the sort or that he even suspected it, and who could prove it?

Then there was the time a harmless-looking thing from Titan, looking like nothing so much as a ball of fur balanced on four dainty legs, unexpectedly threw out a feeler several yards long, like the tongue of an ant-eater, and stung two bystanders with a poisoned barb in the tip, turning them into swollen purple masses in a matter of minutes. That one cost Mike Sill a cool half-million dollars in damages paid to the families of the victims, and resulted in all the 'animal'

cages being enclosed in glass as well as steel mesh.

BIG Mike looked across the table at me, twirling the new goblet of absinthe, relishing the anticipation.

"I like you, young fellow," he rasped. "You remind me of the time when I was starting out, full of energy and ideas. That's why I'm giving you this interview. Big Mike Sill's first official interview in two years!"

He laughed hollowly and raised the goblet. But this time he sipped reflectively, his dark-rimmed, sunken eyes staring with horrified fascination into the distance at some thought or remembered scene.

So intense was his stare that I shuddered and glanced involuntarily over my left shoulder, but there was nothing behind me but the public bar, where spacemen and their companions of the evening mingled with engineers and their ladies.

I looked back again. Mike Sill had set his half-empty goblet down and cradled his face in his hands. I coughed discreetly and he lifted his head again, fixing me with his

deep-set, shadowed eyes. He rubbed his forehead abstractedly.

"Oh yes, young fellow," he rumbled, "I was going to tell you all about why Big Mike retired from the specimen collecting, business and became the biggest lush on three planets and four moons!" He scratched his chin thoughtfully. "But will you ever believe what I tell you? Will anybody believe what you tell *them*? Will they believe that there was anything so awful that it drove tough Mike Sill into selling out his business for half its worth?"

He struck the table heavily. "Bah," he rasped scornfully, "they think it was those accidents at the Museum of All Planets that drove me out of the business."

He leaned forward confidentially, and whispered in hoarse tones: "The worst of them all was never shown to the public—and never will be!" He shuddered then. "There are some things that should *never* be seen. That's why I got out of the specimen business, fast. I was afraid of what some

money-hungry space prospector would show up with next."

He drained the goblet and this time merely tossed it limply into a corner, as though all the strength had gone out of him. He waved away the waiter this time. "No more for a while," he said thickly, "I promised this young man a story." The waiter bowed and withdrew, closing the soundproof glass door with the one-way vision.

With the sounds of talking and laughing and music from the public bar cut off, the private cubicle was heavily silent, and I could now make out Big Mike's labored breathing. His ruddy face had taken on a congested, purplish-veined appearance, and I grew alarmed, having read something of the deleterious effects of continued absinthe drinking.

He saw my expression and smiled sardonically. "Don't worry," he chuckled, "I'm not going to pass out or die on you." He drew a small gold pillbox from one pocket, extracted a greenish pill and popped it into his mouth. His color improved rapidly. "Ah, that's better," he sighed.

"You were going to tell me—?" I prompted.

He shook his head doubtfully. "I don't know, I don't know... Will they ever believe you? Many a young reporter has tried to crash into the by-line set by padding up a story."

I tapped my notebook with my pencil, pointing to the preliminary notes I had made. "I can take down your story in longhand," I offered anxiously, "and you could sign it to verify the authenticity. How about it?"

He thought for a moment. "All right," he said suddenly, "a promise is a promise. And maybe it will serve as a warning to other zoo-men and specimen hunters who are eager to follow in my footsteps."

His eyes widened in fear. He put out one big, hairy hand and rested it heavily on mine. "Be sure to tell them that they can't be too careful. Life takes many forms throughout the universe, and some day they may stumble on something they can't hold in a net or a trap or a cage, or in anything

else. When you end your story, tell them that!"

I remained respectfully silent while he seemed to be gathering his thoughts. The waiter stood outside the closed door, not seeing us, but knowing that we could see him. I pressed the button that flashed a red light above the entrance, indicating that service was not now desired, an admirable feature where couples often wanted privacy along with their intimacy...

I sat with my notebook open and my pencil poised.

IT happened two years ago of course, said Mike. I was in my office in the tower over the entrance to the museum and zoo, with a deskful of ringing telephones and the chairs filled with hopeful space prospectors and just plain bums. It was a standing rule that no live specimens were brought to me there, no matter how small, or innocent-looking, because you never knew what these alien specimens were capable of doing.

Then too of course, there was always the quarantine at the spaceports. If I accepted an

alien beast, it had to be put through an incubation lab to see whether any dangerous germs could be bred from it. If not, it was then transported to the zoo in a sealed car.

So the procedure was for the hopefuls to bring me photos of their pets to see whether they were desirable for the zoo. Some were obviously touched up to bring out some unusual feature of the specimen, or to put one in where there wasn't any. And some were duplications of creatures I already had. I quickly weeded out the phonies and the duplications, and bought a pair of ten-foot-long rock scorpions from Titan, from one of my old reliable suppliers. Then he left, and I was all ready to go out to lunch when I heard a light cough, and for the first time saw this wizened old space rat practically swallowed up in the velvet cushions of one of my plush divans reserved for visiting VIP's.

"You'll have to leave now," I snapped. "Come back in about two hours with your photos. I'm going out to lunch now."

He raised his five feet and one hundred and twenty pounds of bone and gristle out of the divan. He smiled with a smirk that made me feel like I needed a shower, and his voice was like oil drained off after ten thousand miles of driving.

"I got something for you," he oozed, "the likes of which there never was and ain't anywhere else, except right in my ship. I ain't even registered it for quarantine yet. I want you to have first look at it, Mr. Sill."

I shook my head impatiently, and headed for the door, taking him by one scrawny arm and pulling him after me. "Not now, my friend," I repeated. "Wait outside if you like. I'll be back around three o'clock."

He held back with surprising strength, and I was about to call out to my male secretary to help me throw the little spacer out, as long as he was going to be obstinate. But then he reached into an inner pocket of his filthy coveralls and pulled out a wrinkled snapshot. I snatched it from his hand and released his arm suddenly.

"What on earth is it?" I muttered curiously.

"Not on earth," he chuckled. "Venus. Found it in one of those deep caves everybody else is afraid to go into!" He stood with his hands on his hips, relishing my curiosity.

It was a photo of a large glass tank, half full of water, and reinforced with bands of metal running horizontally around the four sides, and the whole thing topped with a plastic cover hinged at one side and fastened down with a padlock at the opposite side. In the background I could see the rungs of a ladder set against one wall, indicating that the tank was in the cargo compartment of a one-man space scouter.

Besides the metal straps running around the four walls of the tank, vision of the thing inside was further obscured—perhaps intentionally—by the dim light coming from the single fluorescent overhead. But I could make out this big gray blob floating or swimming in the center. It was shapeless—yet, not quite. There was something tantalizingly famil-

iar in the portion of the swimmer that stuck above the level of the water.

I turned the picture this way and that, trying to get it in a better light. "Looks like an oversized jellyfish or ameba," I grunted indifferently. "Maybe no one has ever found one that large, but aside from that, what's so unusual about it?"

The little man took back the photo, looked at it lovingly, and thrust it back under his coveralls. "I know that ain't a very good picture," he grinned. "Poor light. Ought to see it for yourself to do it justice."

I said, casually, "Why the big tank? Your overgrown ameba is almost lost in it."

"Got to give it room to grow," he rasped, still grinning. "Wouldn't be surprised if it was going to split in two pretty soon, far as that goes!"

I tried to prod him again. "Yes, old-timer, but what does it do? I have an aquarium full of marine life that make this blob almost lovable."

He poked me in the chest with a bony forefinger. "Mister Sill, this here animal's a zoo and a 'quarium all rolled in

one." He licked his lips. "I been trainin' it, in a way..."

"*Training it?*" I repeated incredulously. "What can a shapeless mass of protoplasm like that learn?" I turned to leave again. He seized my coat sleeve.

"Mr. Sill," he whined earnestly, dropping the oily smile that he evidently considered suave, "I'll make a deal with you. If this little honey of mine ain't everything I say it is, you can have it for free. I'll leave it up to you. Fair enough?"

Since I usually paid a thousand dollars and up for new items, depending on their rarity and shock value, I thought the offer was worth thirty minutes of my time, and told the old codger so.

But I still said he would have to wait until I got back to the office from lunch. No use showing too much interest and giving him a bargaining point. I figured that the minimum fee of a thousand would be just about right, and had no desire to haggle with him to bring down an over-inflated estimate.

So I left him outside in the waiting room and went to

lunch. The smile was back on his face as I took off. He knew he had me hooked.

WHEN I got back at three o'clock he was waiting patiently. I told the receptionist I might be gone for an hour or so, or just possibly for the rest of the afternoon, and not to make any more appointments for me that day. The little space rat and I took the elevator to the roof, where we climbed into my private helicopter and headed for the space port. Clem Linton, as he finally identified himself, guided me to the farthest and dingiest outlying strip of the port, where berthing fees were cheapest. I set the whirlybird down near a small ship of ancient vintage that looked as if it leaked air through the seams of the entrance lock when it got out into space. We climbed out of the 'copter and crunched over gravel to where the old ship loomed like an abandoned watch tower in the late afternoon sun.

Clem Linton opened the outer lock on hinges that actually creaked, and led the way in-

side. I had to stoop to get through the entrance. It was like walking into a dark, musty cave. I stumbled over the rim of the inner lock. Then I heard a *click* as my guide threw a switch, and the interior was coldly lighted by a single fluorescent set in the wall.

He led the way down a short corridor so narrow that I had to walk partially sideways to get through. "How on earth did you ever get that tank in your hold?" I asked.

"Cargo lock," he answered shortly. "Other side, ground level." We came to a round trapdoor set in the metal floor. "Here we are," he added, and raised the lid with surprising ease. I followed him down the short ladder into the dimly lighted cargo hold and looked around as I stepped off the last rung.

They say that there is no such thing as instinctive fear, that we learn to be afraid of the dark, and of snakes and bugs and crawly things. Maybe they're right. Maybe it was the few loose feathers on the floor, and the big tuft of fur floating on the surface of the water in one corner of the tank,

and the various birds and animals huddled in terrified, abject silence in the cages set in the corners of the hold—all this might have combined to make the hairs at the back of my neck stand up and an invisible icicle to drip lazily down my spine. But I don't think so.

Clem danced up to the side of the tank, rubbing his hands gleefully and singing a few bars from that ribald old army song from the twentieth century:

"Bless 'em all, bless 'em all,
"The long and the short and
the tall."

I followed him slowly over to the tank. It only came up to my shoulders, but it was over his head. A stepladder leaning against one side showed how he got to the hatch on the top.

I stared, fascinated, at the thing floating in the center of the pool. It was a big, dirty gray blob, without tentacles, or fins, or any external features. You might not even have thought it alive, were it not for the slowly pulsing sac near the center, like a primitive heart, and the channels radiat-

ing from it, flowing with a sluggish 'blood' of a faintly green tinge. Otherwise it was very quiet, as if asleep, or waiting. As for size, I judged it to be five feet in diameter.

Clem seemed to read my thoughts. "Weren't always that big," he crooned. "I fed it and nursed it. See that fish bowl over there?" My gaze followed his pointing arm to a fair-sized bowl in which a number of goldfish swam lazily. "I brung it home from Venus in that. Then as I fed it and it kept growin' bigger, I had to keep gettin' bigger bowls. But that ain't all I found out about it, not by a long shot, mister." And he began to do the song and dance routine again. I felt that he was more than a little off center.

"Step up a little closer and look real hard," he gurgled gleefully. I pressed my nose against the glass reluctantly. Even with the barrier between me and *that*, I didn't want to get close.

After a minute of hard staring, I saw that the glob of protoplasm was rotating slowly, as though stirred by a slow cur-

rent. And as the far side swept languidly into view, I could make out faint, shadowy traceries in the murky interior.

They were the skeletons of small birds and animals and fishes, complete in every detail but reduced to almost complete transparency, like plastic models.

“NOW watch this, watch this!” the wizened space rat chortled, and bounded to one of the cages in a dark corner. He pulled out a trembling white mouse and approached the tank. Then he held the mouse close to the glass, dangling it by its tail. At first I thought he was going to feed it to the giant ameba, but all he did was hold it close to the glass wall.

The blob began to move.

I watched, frozen, as the thing flowed ever so slowly to the side of the tank where Clem stood with his white mouse. I have seen many horrors from the inner and outer planets in my day, but the approach of this faceless spheroid of flesh made my blood run cold. At last it was on the side

of the tank near Clem, and paused only inches from the barrier, about one eighth of it protruding above the surface, and the rest of the mass below, like a gelatinous iceberg.

A ripple began to stir on the slimy portion that stuck out above the surface. Then little bumps arose and grew larger, like bubbles rising to the surface of molasses or pitch. But they did not burst. They merged together. They melted and flowed and finally settled into a recognizable shape.

A white mouse. The shape of a white mouse.

Oh, it was not too perfect; there was no fur, for example, but otherwise it was a good reproduction. I even thought I could see terror in the rudimentary eyes of the false-mouse, as if it almost had an independent existence of its own.

“Now watch.” Clem returned the real mouse to its cage. While I watched, hypnotized by the sight, the pseudo-mouse began to melt and run together like wax over a flame, and sank down finally and disappeared into the parent mass.

Half an hour passed while he took creature after creature and held it up to the silent mimic in the tank, and one after one I saw their reproductions form on that awful bulk.

"Of course," Clem remarked at one point, "I have to feed one specimen to it before it can do an imitation. You might say it's a collector, just like you, Mr. Sill."

At last I managed to croak, "But what—how? I mean, what's the purpose of the whole thing?" I sat down on a nearby stool and mopped my brow.

"Well, now," he said proudly, "I'm not one of them scientists, but I give it a lot of thought in the last few weeks, and got me a good idea why. It's a lure."

"A *lure*?" I think I must have looked stupid.

"Sure," he said with a superior smirk. "When you go fishin' you put a lure on the end of your line—something that looks like a tasty bug to a fish, and it swallows the hook. Now, my baby here, why she goes one better, and imitates what's in front of her, to make it come closer. Even a fish is smart enough some

times, or just plain not hungry, so's not to bite at a lure. But what could be more friendly-like than somebody of your own kind? You'd just naturally go up to him or her to pass the time of day."

He patted the glass wall fondly. "Now my baby here is real smart. She does just that—makes out like she's something else, and then when the curious critter gets close: *snap!* She throws out a sort of ropy thing and pulls it in and has her dinner. Found out she could do this accidental, and been feedin' her all sorts of bugs and animals, and birds and fishes."

I could imagine the delight he must have taken in feeding it, with the playful cruelty of of a small boy dropping flies into a spider's web.

"And the beauty of it is," he went on enthusiastically, "is the more you feed her, the bigger she grows and the more imitations she can do. Why there just ain't no end to it!" He wound up his sales pitch out of breath. "How about it now, Mister Sill," he concluded, squinting craftily, "will ten

thousand be right for little honey here?"

I stroked my chin as if considering his offer. "Five thousand is tops," I said firmly.

The first look of disappointment was quickly replaced by the greedy look again. "Tell you what," he said. "I got some improvements in mind. If they work out, maybe you'd raise the price some?"

"If it's a real addition to what you already have here, I'll think about it." I got up and stretched, as if I was beginning to get a little bored or tired. "Well," I added, "when you make your improvements, call me at my office and I'll try to get out again. So long for now."

He preceded me up the iron ladder, through the narrow passage way and out onto the space port, almost bowing and scraping like a waiter leading a big tipper to his favorite table. It was already getting dark outside. I had not realized how long we had been down in the stuffy hold. Clem grabbed my hand and shook it as we parted. Once back in my 'copter, I wiped it on my trousers leg.

TWO days later in mid-afternoon I picked up the phone and heard that oily voice on the other end. It was Clem, and he was excited.

"Listen, Mister Sill, it worked! It worked! My improvement! I just never fed it anything so big. Couldn't afford expensive meat. I fed it a dog, Mister Sill, a big dog, a Collie, and brought another one along to make it imitate

"Now listen careful," he sputtered excitedly. "I rented me a radio-telephone and got it here in the hold now. I'm goin' to lead the real Collie up to the side of the tank. Listen!"

Then there was the sound of the radio-telephone cabinet being drawn across the floor of the distant ship, followed by faint footsteps and a pathetic bark. I could see that foul dungeon in my mind's eye. There was a minute of silence, then an agonized help as Clem did something to the live dog to make it 'talk.' Then I heard the second sound, like a distorted echo, or like a phonograph recording slowed down, so that the answering yelp was drawn out, and deeper.

Clem returned to the other end of the line. "That's it," he said breathlessly. "It can make sounds now. Don't know why it couldn't before. Unless maybe the things I fed it weren't big enough or smart enough to make it more like themselves, if you know what I mean. Now a Collie is a big animal and it's smart, so I guess Baby was able to make a better Collie than anything else. And that's not all. I got myself a young ape. Ought to be interestin' what she can do with that. What do you say now, Big Mike? I put a lot of money into this."

"All right," I said quickly, "I'll be down there in about an hour. Then we'll make the arrangements to get your pet into quarantine. But for heaven's sake, hold off on that ape, or you'll have the SPCA down on you. They don't care what you do to extra-terrestrial creatures, but they're death on cruelty to earth animals."

"Don't worry," he chuckled. "No one seen me bringin' these animals into my ship. Now hurry on down here, Mister Sill!"

I hurried. Clem really had an attraction now for my zoo. I could visualize the streams of visitors bringing their pets in and watching that plastic blob put on its imitations. I was not going to let a competitor latch on to it. I tore out of the office, stuffing a few hundreds into an envelope for a down payment and putting it in my pocket along with a blank contract form.

I landed the 'copter on the field as a blood-red sun was sinking down toward the western horizon. The old ship loomed up before me, blackened and blotched with corrosion, like something dead and in the first stage of decomposition.

The outer lock of the access hatch was open, and the dim light was on inside, so I stooped and went inside. It was very quiet, too much so. I could feel the prickling at the back of my neck start again. I moved forward cautiously toward the narrow passageway that led to the entrance to the cargo hold.

I called out tentatively: "Clem?"

There was no answer.

"Clem!" I called out, a little louder, my voice sounding hollow in the metal confines of the ship.

Silence.

I started to move forward again toward the dark manhole at the other end of the passage, and stopped short.

I heard a patter and a scraping, and then a strange chittering sound, like the faint chuckling of an asthmatic old man. I pressed my back against the cold steel wall in alarm as a small human-like shape bounded suddenly out of the hold and scampered toward me, half erect and half on all fours.

I sighed with relief as it came into the light and I saw that it was the young ape Clem had spoken about. I grabbed for it as it went by, but it snarled with mixed rage and fear and darted by me, out through the open lock and out onto the field. I wondered what they would think in the direction tower when they saw an ape bounding across the landing field.

I wiped the perspiration

from my forehead and went on to the manhole leading down into the hold. The light was on.

"Clem?" I called out again. But there was no reply. I thought he might have been asleep, or maybe went out for a quick snack or a drink. I decided I would wait for him. I climbed down the iron rungs and stepped off onto the floor. I found the stool I had sat on two days before, and lighted a cigarette to pass the time while I waited for Clem.

My eyes travelled slowly around the dim room. A whimper pulled my attention to a far corner, and I could make out the form of the second Collie, crouched on its belly, tied to a stanchion. I went over to it to pet it, but the low, ominous growl made me think better of it. I returned to the stool.

I finished the cigarette, and then a second and a third. I looked at my wrist watch. Half an hour had gone by, and still no Clem. I got up my nerve and walked to the tank in the center of the hold, deciding to get a better look at what I was going to invest some ten thousand dollars in.

The damned thing was floating lazily in the dirty water, throbbing slowly and turning around slowly like it had the first time I saw it. It also looked considerably larger. Clem had certainly been stuffing it.

I drew back as it started to swim toward me, but then realized there was thick, reinforced glass between it and me, and stood my ground with gritted teeth. It surged up against the inside of the glass and rebounded slightly. I was startled now to see how much weight it had really put on. Then, while I stared, the huge blob of protoplasm, which now reached nearly to the lid of the tank, began to ripple and bubble. I wanted to turn and run, but stood riveted to the spot with horrified fascination.

The thought ran through my fevered mind: *What can it possibly be going to imitate? I am the only living creature near enough to the tank.*

Then it gave me the answer to my unspoken question. Oh, God! I still see it in my nightmares. And worse still, I hear it.

That abomination continued

to bubble and swell until I thought it would never stop. Then the bumps began to merge together, as they had done before. Slowly, like something out of an opium smoker's nightmare, a face formed out of the shapeless mass, flowing like water, but getting more solid all the time.

Then I saw it clearly, beyond all doubt and forever beyond all possibility of forgetfulness. It was Clem's face, and Clem's head, and then the outlines of a neck and shoulder. It was so good that even the eyes had that pale, washed-out blue color of the original man.

I staggered back against the wall, upsetting the goldfish bowl with a crash, and the fish flopped on the floor in their death agony while I slumped to my knees and hid my face in my hands. I think I cried, after the initial shock of horror gave way to anguished pity for what happened to the old space rat.

I think I know what happened. Clem must have been crouched on the lid of the tank with the trapdoor open, at-

tempting to throw the young ape to his pet. It had been too strong for him, and in the struggle Clem fell victim instead. I wondered dully how long it had taken to—*digest* him. Then, later, when I had appeared on the scene, the hellish mimic had given its master performance: an imitation of a human being for the first time.

I finally pulled myself together. I knew what had to be done. I knew that cyanide was deadly to all protoplasm. In the zoo we kept special guns loaded with glass needles that burst inside the target, releasing deadly hydrocyanic acid.

Dragging myself up the ladder shakily, I left the ship, climbed into my 'copter and flew back to the office. It was dark now, and the office staff had gone home. I got my cyanide pistol out of the desk drawer, ran back to the helicopter and flew once more to the space port.

It was all I could do to force myself into the bowels of that dying old hulk and down again into the hold. The remaining live Collie had wrapped its

rope around and around the stanchion, and crouched now on the floor, frothing at the mouth. In one corner, a small bird lay stiff on the floor of its cage, dead of fright.

The air in the hold was heavy and oppressive, like the atmosphere just before a thunderstorm. The great blob of protoplasm in the tank was featureless once more, but seemed to be internally agitated, as if for once it had swallowed more than it could digest, and small waves lapped against the glass walls of its prison.

Standing on the tips of my toes, I could see that my guess as to what had happened earlier was probably right, for the trapdoor stood ajar in the lid of the tank. I raised my arm over my head, pointing the pistol on a downward slant toward the opening, and fired. But the angle was impossible, and the first needle went wide of its mark. I realized I would have to get up closer.

Trembling violently in every limb, I forced myself to mount the step-ladder and crawl on my hands and knees across the top of the tank to the opening,

for a direct shot at the huge gray mass. I should have remembered what Clem had told me about its method of capturing prey.

With a speed incredible for that seemingly sluggish bulk, a long tentacle whipped up from the depths of the tank, dripping with foul water and slime, and lashed out at my wrist. I pulled back just in time, for only the tip of the pseudopod slapped wetly across the back of my wrist.

But that single caress burned like acid. I screamed with pain and rolled over to the outer edge of the lid and fell to the floor. I crawled over to the Collie's pan of water and dipped my burning wrist again and again. Then I heard a squishing, rubbery squeak and whirled around. Scrambling to my feet, I saw with a numbing shock that the thing was beginning to ooze up out of the tank and flow across the lid toward me.

I ran for the ladder in panic, but slipped on the corpse of a goldfish, and the agony of a broken ankle sent stabbing spears of fire into my brain.

I tried to hop across the hold on my good foot, and was making fair progress, when I heard a sucking, slopping sound and looked back over my shoulder.

Almost the entire mass of the enormous ameba was now out of the tank and was starting to flow across the floor as if to cut off my escape. I screamed until there was blood in my throat.

I leaped for the ladder with a superhuman effort and made it, pulling myself up hand over hand and dragging my bad leg behind me. Somehow I had the presence of mind to hold the pistol between my teeth. Another tentacle lashed out from the living nightmare behind me, but missed. I finally made it to the top, wriggled through the manhole and lay on the gangway on my belly gasping for air.

My right hand and wrist now burned with such agony that I had to take the pistol in my left hand. Stopping the trembling by sheer effort of will, I aimed the cyanide pistol down and fired needle after needle into the churning gray mass below as it milled about in blind frustration.

And then I looked down into the deepest pit of hell.

Have you ever seen how a moth or a fly behaves when you spray it with insecticide? It becomes blindly phototropic. That is as the poison begins to work, its nervous system becomes deranged. The insect reverts to some basic instinct, flying again and again into the nearest light until it dies.

As the thing below me began to die, it blindly followed its primal instinct. One after another, in an insane kaleidoscope, form followed form across the upper surface of the heaving bulk: insects, fishes, birds; then mice and rabbits and other small animals, followed finally by the shape of the Collie.

Then, in its ultimate dying agony, the thing belched a huge bubble, and the head of Clem formed in the frothing, gelatinous mass, and shot up into the air on a long stalk, bobbing to and fro a mere foot below me. Then, from the writhing, twisting caricature of his face, the pale blue eyes looked up at me, and in a moment of madness I thought

they recognized me and were trying to say something.

I screamed and hurled the empty pistol at the contorted, rubbery head. The pistol bounced off, covered with fermenting slime, and where it had struck, an opening appeared and a mouth formed, grinning idiotically I whimpered as the mouth gaped wider and the sounds came out. God help me!

First there came a sort of high-pitched whistling, quickly followed by a deep, gluey gurgling accompanied by brief gusts of fetid gases heavy with the odor of death and decay. Then the head made a final convulsive effort and half sang, half roared the sounds.

"*essmm AWRRR! essmm AWRRR!*" it belched, with an idiotic irrelevancy that made a mockery of life and death.

I tried to clap my hands over my ears, but too late to shut out that thick, glutinous bellow; too late not to know what it was trying to say—or sing. It was the first line of Clem's favorite ditty.

Then the head suddenly collapsed like a punctured balloon

and dropped back into the stinking, decomposing bulk, where pores as big as saucers opened and closed spasmodically, emitting puffs of vile fumes. I staggered to my feet and found my way out again into the clean, pure air of night.

BIG Mike Sill finished his story and sat with his eyes closed, his face a mask of anguish. I sat stunned and silent. Then Big Mike opened his eyes again, reached for my notebook silently, and signed it as he had promised. As he did so, I saw the mark on his wrist—a deep, raw furrow, as if the flesh had sloughed off at one time and never healed over completely.

After he signed my notebook, he began to press the green service button again and again, frantically. The waiter

hurried in and set a glass and a bottle of whiskey in front of him and left. Mike Sill waved a hand at me in dismissal, then poured a straight shot with a trembling hand and tossed it off, then a second and a third. When he looked up again and saw that I was still there, he roared at me to get out and leave him alone.

I stood in the doorway for a moment watching him. He had forgotten me, and had begun to pound on the table with both fists, beating out the time crudely as he started to sing, in a hoarse voice,

“Bless ’em all, bless ’em all—”

I left the private booth hurriedly and closed the door behind me.

As for myself, I don’t think I’ll ever want to go to Venus.

THE END
