



JULES VERNE'S TOMBSTONE AT AMIENS  
PORTRAYING HIS IMMORTALITY

# AMAZING STORIES

## Scientific Fiction

Vol. 6

December, 1931

No. 9

### In Our Next Issue

**POWER**, by Harl Vincent. The destiny of the world depends largely upon power. Man is only a weakling. The falls of Niagara are a giant. And to those who possess and control this thing called power belongs unlimited possibilities for autocratic control of their fellow beings. The days of wind-mills and water-mills are gone. And there is hardly any assurance that our new and latest forms are going to remain forever the best. Our well-known author, for instance, who is definitely interested in the science of electric power, offers some astonishingly interesting possibilities for a certain substitute of our present-day power-making history of the future.

**TUMITHAK OF THE CORRIDORS**, by Charles R. Tanner. It is not necessarily cowardice that makes a people retreat further and further from an enemy which has ruthlessly brought complete destruction and death to thousands. It is sensible caution that comes with experience. But always there is someone—in generations far removed, perhaps—who dares to risk all in an effort to release his people, from the bonds of such enslaving fears. (Crowded out of December issue.)

**THE PLANET OF THE DOUBLE SUN**, by Neil R. Jones. Here is another sequel relating the extraordinary adventures of Professor Jameson, who first started his voyage in a ship of his own construction, in which he was placed in suspended animation and was later rescued when his ship was found, and was at first mistaken for a satellite. Very much more exciting even than its two predecessors.

**THE INEVITABLE CONFLICT**, by Paul H. Lovering. (A Serial in two parts) Part II. In old times the nations of the world were usually ruled by men. Yet there were some ruling Queens. Queen Elizabeth, for instance, governed with an iron hand. And every now and then some woman would be known to do her part in settling the destinies of nations. Now there is a growing tendency to place women on an equal footing with men in the fields of politics. Who can tell how far-reaching these tendencies may become? In the concluding chapters our author tells us.

And other unusual science fiction

### In Our December Issue

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### Our Cover

this month depicts a scene from the story entitled, "The Inevitable Conflict," by Paul H. Lovering, in which Mowbray's hastily rigged-up machines and his trained men, with the aid of the women from the "Legion," do justice to the faith of Mowbray in a terrific battle for the continued independence of the United States of America, from the Mongolian Empire. Part I published in this issue.

Cover illustration by Morcy

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EDITORIAL AND EXECUTIVE OFFICES  
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the next date of issue.



*Standing just inside at a platform was one of the overhead monorail cars, but much larger and more elaborate than the first one we had seen.*

MORAY T.

# The Blattids

By Morrison Colladay

Author of "The Burning Swamp"

*THINGS are not always what they seem. For instance, when some scientists of note specifically stated that volcanic activity in a certain part of the country was highly improbable, the natural conclusion was that what seemed to be a volcanic eruption was only a display of the aurora borealis—despite the fact that the aurora borealis was never known to be visible there either. The truth of the whole matter, though, never dawned on anybody, until it was proven by the only two eye-witnesses to a similar display in another region.*

Illustrated by MOREY

THREE months have passed since Jim Weeks and I discovered the giant roaches at the meteor mound. After our escape from the burning swamp, we went back to Memphis and got a room in a cheap hotel, where we could watch the thick column of smoke from our windows. We were convinced that the roaches with their irresistible ray tubes were getting ready for a war of extermination against the human race. We wanted to warn people of what was likely to happen, but a few attempts convinced both of us that no one would take seriously the story we tried to tell.

That was why I wrote out the account of what had happened from the time we saw the first meteor until the revolving ray set the swamp on fire. I went over the pages to see if I had forgotten anything and Jim read with me over my shoulder.

"What are we going to do with it now I've written it?" I asked after we had finished reading it.

"I'm blessed if I know," he answered with a puzzled frown. "You wouldn't think people would be such obstinate fools."

A brilliant idea struck me. "I'll tell you what I'm going to do. I'm going to make another copy. Then I'm going to mail one of them to the President of the United States and the other one to the Secretary of War."

"They'll never even see them," scoffed Jim.

"Maybe they won't, but someone will. I bet someone reads every bit of mail that's directed to the President."

So that's what we did. I made the extra copy and we mailed both of them that same day.

Then we waited. Nothing happened. The fire continued to burn. We stayed at the Memphis hotel and watched the black smoke from our windows. Our money got low and it looked as if we should have to write home for more. Our boat was tied up at a dock.

"Looks as if there wasn't much use waiting around here any longer," said Jim one day. "I guess we've done our part anyhow."

"I hate to go away and leave things this way, not knowing what's going to happen," I said.

We didn't decide then, but I suppose we should not have stayed in Memphis much longer even if the swamp had kept on burning. But it didn't. The fire went out just as suddenly as it started.

One morning I got out of bed and went to the window, as usual, to look for the cloud of black smoke on the southwestern horizon. It wasn't there. I couldn't believe my eyes for a moment. Then I went over and shook Jim awake.

"It's gone!" I exclaimed.

"What's gone?" he asked sleepily.

"The smoke. The fire must be out."

We hustled into our clothes and rushed down to the wharf where our boat was tied up. The engine was balky at first, but we finally got started down the river. As we approached the swamp, we saw tied up to the levee, a fleet of the big barge-like steamers that the government uses for its work on the Mississippi. Of the fire there was not a trace, as far as we could see from the river—not even an occasional wisp of smoke.

"Those boats look as if somebody's been noticing the fire, anyway," said Jim.

I steered for the levee, but as we approached it a soldier waved us away.

"I wonder what that means?" I said, stopping the engine and letting the boat drift.

"I guess it means that the army's in charge and they don't want civilians interfering," said Jim.

"Well, these two civilians are going to interfere. Here's the chance we've been waiting for. We'll see whoever is in command and make him listen to us."

I ran the boat in beside the largest of the barges, over the violent protest of a soldier who seemed undecided whether he hadn't better shoot us. He called a sergeant who arrived on the scene just as we started for the gangplank.

"You fellows can't land here," said the sergeant.

"We've got to see the commanding officer," I said firmly. "It's important."

"What do you want to see him for?" He paused then and eyed us intently. "Say, you ain't the two guys they've been looking all over for, are you?"

"What two guys?"

"Them that was here when this blooming fire started, and wrote to Washington about it."

"That's us."

"Then the Colonel's sure going to be glad to see you. Come ahead."

That's how we met Colonel Bullus for the first time. Neither of us had thought about the little matter of giving an address when we sent off our story to Washington. It seems it got immediate action, and the engineering department of the army, which took charge of affairs, wanted to find us to learn further details. They took it for granted we were still on our boat, and they hunted for us from St. Paul to New Orleans.

The sergeant saluted when he ushered us into the Colonel's office. "Here's them guys you been looking for, sir," he said.

Colonel Bullus is probably about forty, but he looks younger. He fixed piercing blue eyes on us and waited for us to speak.

"We're the ones who discovered the meteor mound," said Jim. "We sent an account of it to Washington."

It was then we found we had suddenly become very important persons. We were made official members of the expedition, which included a party of scientists from the Smithsonian Institution. Most of the scientists were on shore examining the site of the fire when we arrived, but that night they questioned us for hours.

Jim and I learned a lot about roaches from their discussion. Their scientific name is Blattidae—when you want to be familiar, you call them Blattids. There are a thousand living varieties as well as a hundred fossil. The entomologists made us describe the creatures we saw at the mound, in the minutest detail. They decided that the gigantic invaders were a development of the *Periplaneta Orientalis* variety, which they described as large, dark brown, nearly wingless and living in colonies.

WHEN we got up the next morning, all the other members of the party were on shore. We grabbed some breakfast and started after them. The day before we had been so anxious to see Colonel Bullus that we had hardly glanced at the site of the fire. Now, as we stood on the levee and looked over the bare white dust-filled depression which extended as far as the eye could see, we could scarcely realize that a few weeks before we had poled over it in a boat.

The engineers discovered, the day the fire suddenly and without warning went out, that the ground under what had been the swamp was extraordinarily treacherous. For a distance downward, varying from fifteen to twenty-five feet, the soil had disintegrated into a fine dust, which was almost like quicksand. Anyone stepping on it was immediately swallowed up. It is assumed that several of the soldiers lost their lives in this way. They disappeared, and there is unfortunately not much question that they were sucked down into the hot dust.

The engineers began constructing a road to the mound, which they assumed from our description to be in the mathematical center of the burned district. The road was completed at the end of a week. In the meantime Colonel Bullus had insisted that we run no risks and stay near the barge headquarters. There was nothing for us to do, and we got very restless.

"I don't see that there's any more danger for us out there than there is for you or anyone else," I complained.

"Maybe not, but you two are the only persons in the world who have first-hand information about this affair. We can't take chances with you yet. There will doubtless be plenty of risk for you before we get through."

Finally he came on board one noon and said, "Come on, boys, I want you to go with me and see if there's anything you can recognize in there. Road's through and we'll start right after lunch."

We went on foot over what was practically a corduroy road. The engineers had made a mat of underbrush on the powdery earth and on top of that had placed logs. It doesn't sound like much of a road, but mules were dragging carts over it when we started.

Colonel Bullus set a pace of nearly five miles an hour, and that is fast walking, as anyone will admit who has ever timed himself on a tramp. There were ten miles of blinding white dust—that was all it was possible to see. There was nothing to break the monotony except the road which stretched before and behind us. Whenever there was a puff of wind the dust rose in choking clouds. From time to time we passed mule carts which were laboring along in the same direction.

I looked hopefully ahead for the first sight of the mound. It seemed that hours passed, and nothing appeared. At length the road came to an end at a large circular depression where men were working with shovels and wheelbarrows. Colonel Bullus stopped.

"We're there," he said.

Jim and I looked blankly from the great saucer-shaped depression to him, and then around the white dust-covered plain.

"This is the exact center of the burned area," he explained. "If the fire was set by a ray of some kind operating in a circle, this is where it came from."

"You mean the mound was where this hole is?" I exclaimed. "It isn't possible! It was at least sixty feet high!"

"Well, you see it isn't here." I suppose Jim and I looked so upset that he took pity on us. "We don't doubt your story," he continued. "We've come to the conclusion that the Blattids retreated underground after they started the fire. They must have leveled the mound, for reasons of their own—perhaps they thought it wiser to leave nothing on the surface to arouse inconvenient curiosity after the fire went out."

"But how could they level it?" asked Jim.

"I don't know what method they used, but it must

have been comparatively easy for creatures with their engineering knowledge and the machines you say they had."

WE stood around for a couple of hours in the sun, watching the workers enlarge the hole they were digging. "We're going to find out how they got away," said Colonel Bullus, "—if they did get away. If we had excavating machinery, it wouldn't take long, but there isn't any available."

The engineers had rigged up a telephone from the excavation to the government boat on which we were living. We had just returned from the site of the mound and were at dinner when Colonel Bullus was called to the phone. We heard the one-sided conversation that followed.

"... When did you reach it? ... What does it look like? ... Hm. ... Getting it pretty well uncovered? ... No chance of going through it, I suppose? ... Yes, I know we can go around it. ... I'll be out there in an hour. I've borrowed a horse. ... All right."

The Colonel came back to the table. "I haven't time to finish dinner. I've just had a message that the workmen have reached a metal platform which they're uncovering. They haven't found out yet how much there is. I'm going out now."

"How about taking us with you, Colonel?" asked Jim.

"Sorry, but I'm going to ride and there's only one horse. You're too tired for another twenty-mile tramp. Better wait and come out tomorrow morning."

If we had gone with him that night, we might have saved some lives. On the other hand, we might have been killed ourselves. "Be careful what you do," I warned him. "You don't want to run into a trap."

"If the Blattids are waiting for us underground, with the weapons they used when you saw them, we won't have much chance. But they may not know that you and Jim escaped the fire. If you two had been killed, no one on earth would know anything about them."

"But even if they don't expect an attack, and you find them, what sort of weapons can you use against them?"

"Gas. I can't tell you much about the kind we're going to use, but no Blattids or anything else can live when it's turned loose."

Colonel Bullus did not return to the boat that night. Before daylight Jim and I were on our way to the place where the mound had been. There were so many soldiers going out that the road was uncomfortably crowded.

We reached the excavation without meeting the Colonel on the road. We almost forgot him when we caught a glimpse of the great mass of the curious, gleaming metal which had been uncovered by the workmen.

It was a scene of tremendous activity. The road had been extended down to the metal surface, by beginning an incline half a mile from the excavation. Mule carts were going up and down this road in a steady stream. Soldiers were lounging around, evidently waiting for orders. I saw Lieutenant Saylor, whom we had gotten to know pretty well, directing the movement of the mule carts.

"Hello," he called to us. "How is it you fellows aren't with the Colonel?"

I explained. "Where is he now?"

"Down there in a cave they found." He pointed toward the far side of the excavation.

"What do you suppose it all means?" I asked, to find out just how much he knew.

"It's very curious," he said. "You see that metal? Well, apparently that was poured in there molten to stop up an enormous crater. I suppose this was once a volcano."

"What about the cave?" I interrupted.

"I'm coming to that. The men uncovered all this mass of metal. Then Colonel Bullus made them begin digging around it to see how deep it extended. They hadn't gone very far over there on the south side before they came to an opening under it. I suppose it was the original core of the volcano."

Jim and I looked at each other. We did not know yet how much Lieutenant Saylor had been told of the real facts. Most of the officers, as far as we could gather, knew of the fire and the efforts to put it out. They knew nothing of our experiences and nothing of the Blattids. The scientists were the only members of the party who had been told everything.

"What are they taking all this stuff down there for?" I asked, "and why all the troops?"

"Search me," said Saylor. "It's the rummest go I ever heard of. Looks as if they were getting ready for a battle."

"Where's the Colonel?"

"Down there underground somewhere. Better not bother him till he comes out."

WE wandered around the edge of the excavation while we waited. It had rained the night before and the powdered earth had hardened enough so we could walk on it without sinking in.

As we approached the dark hole which was the entrance to the cavern, I made a discovery. I always carry a pocket compass, and I pulled it out now. "Thought Saylor said this opening was on the south side," I said. "It looks nearer west to me."

Jim squinted around the horizon. "Hard to tell for sure, it's all so flat and white."

I stared at the compass and shook it.

"Broken?" inquired Jim. "I don't believe you've used it since the day we poled through the swamp—the day the fire started."

I handed it to him. "Look," I said.

"Funny!" he exclaimed. "That metal must be magnetic."

"Notice the terrific pull on the needle."

Jim studied the compass for a minute or two. Then he started to walk slowly around the edge of the excavation. The needle continued to point directly at the metallic mass in the center, except at one spot. When we reached that spot it tried to turn directly downward. "Now I wonder what that means?" asked Jim thoughtfully.

"I suppose it means there's more of the metal right under where we're standing."

"Well, one thing's certain. The Blattids didn't bring all this stuff with them. Why down there in the pit there must be thousands of tons of it. Remember all we saw—scaffolds and elevators and machinery."

"I have a theory about that," I said. "I think it's made by their ray-machines, in some fashion. I bet we'll find it everywhere we find them."

"You don't suppose they're underneath where we're standing now?"

"No, but we're standing over the cave. It must be

an artificial passage. Natural caves don't occur in alluvial soil like this. See if we don't find the Blattids have traveled underground like moles and escaped to some part of the country."

"But how would that account for the compass?" persisted Jim.

"That's what I'm trying to tell you. Of course, it's only a theory. Suppose they excavate the passage with a ray-machine. They must be using something entirely unknown to us. They couldn't do the work they do by any ordinary means. Now, wherever the machine is used, it leaves a deposit of the metal. That's my idea."

"Very interesting," said Jim. "Still, we haven't any particular reason to suppose it's true."

"Maybe not, but it would account for the facts."

"If you're right," said Jim, "it would be easy to trace the Blattids, wherever they've gone. All we'd have to do would be to find the place they started from and then we could follow them on the surface with a compass."

I looked at him blankly for a moment. "By Jove, I believe that's the most important thing that's been discovered yet!"

"Yes—if it's true."

"Well, we can soon find that out."

"How?"

"We know one spot where the compass is deflected straight downward. Presumably that's part of the cave. Now if we start from there, we ought to be able to trace the course of the underground passage by watching the compass as we walk on the surface. Let's try it."

Ten minutes later we set out on an exultant hunt for Colonel Bullus to tell him of our discovery.

We found that strict orders had been issued that no one was to enter the cave. We waited around for him to appear. Finally it dawned on us that we had nothing to eat since morning.

"It's beginning to get dark," I said. "No use hanging around here any longer."

"I suppose not," agreed Jim. "I guess we'll see the Colonel down at the levee. He surely won't stay out here another night."

By the time we got back to the river we were pretty tired as well as hungry, and we turned in immediately after we had eaten.

It was two forty-five in the morning when the catastrophe occurred. I was in a deep sleep and was awakened by the sound of shouting on deck. I was dazed and for a moment could not think where I was. I saw the extraordinary light through the cabin window, and the confused noises on deck convinced me that something was wrong. I pulled on my trousers just as the boat began to move.

When I reached the deck I realized at once what was happening. A great beam of blue light was sweeping toward us and the ground below was breaking into flame. It was a repetition of what we had seen when the first fire started. Only this time there would be hundreds of men burned to death. Colonel Bullus was out there where the beam was destroying every living thing. All the men we had seen that afternoon were there. It was just by chance that Jim and I were not.

The boat reached the middle of the river before the slowly moving beam of light touched the levee.

"We'd never have got away if you hadn't had steam up," I said to the chief engineer who stuck his head out on deck.

"Huh, steam's been up all the time we've been here."

"How did that happen?"

"I guess Colonel Bullus had a hunch we might need to get away in a hurry. He gave the order."

"There's a good many men dead out there now," I said.

He looked at me sharply. "Colonel Bullus out there?"

I nodded. Just then I couldn't speak.

The engineer scratched his head thoughtfully. "Well, I wouldn't say he's dead yet, youngster," he said. "He's a mighty smart man, is Colonel Bullus."

WHEN daylight came we landed a couple of miles downstream, hoping to find some survivors. We approached the fire as closely as we could, but there was no sign of any of the men who had been working on shore the night before. It seemed quite certain that all had perished. The fire was burning again as fiercely as it had during the weeks we watched it from our hotel window.

Jim and I wandered around all day, but there was nothing we could do. That night we went back to Memphis. Our boat, tied up to the levee, had been destroyed by the fire, as had most of the government vessels.

We wondered what the newspapers would have to say about the catastrophe. There had been a great many soldiers killed. Some of the scientists who perished were world famous. We didn't think that they could ignore the latest tragedy of the swamp, even if news of the earlier ones had been suppressed.

We found there was nothing in the afternoon papers, but it was possible that the news had not arrived in time to get in. It was when the morning papers appeared without a word of what had occurred, that we realized that the iron control of the government was still effective.

Jim and I discussed what we had better do, without getting anywhere. If the situation was serious before, it was much more so now. We had most important information which we must get before the proper authorities, but the question was how, with Colonel Bullus gone.

Then I thought of the Memphis newspaper editor to whom I had told the story of our earlier adventures in the swamp, and who had laughed at us instead of printing them. I had been very much surprised when Colonel Bullus told us that the editor had telegraphed an outline of our story to Washington that night. It was the first intimation the government had had that there was anything unusual occurring there on the Mississippi.

He was evidently in touch with affairs and knew about us. I suggested to Jim that we go to see him. Perhaps this is as good a place as any to acknowledge our indebtedness to this gentleman, who refuses to let us mention his name.

We hunted him up about ten the next morning, and I sent in word that we had come to see him about Colonel Bullus. We were ushered into his private office immediately. He was looking very serious when he shook hands with us.

"I thought you two boys were with the Colonel."

I explained the accident of our not being with him. "We aren't sure he's dead," I continued. "We think perhaps he was captured before the fire started. We've got a scheme by which we think we have a chance to rescue him, if he's still alive. But we need help."

The upshot of this interview was that we appeared

before a board of army engineers. We repeated our adventures from the beginning. We told them about the metal, and our discovery of its effect on the needle of a compass.

"What is it you want to do?" asked the ranking officer, after we had been cross-examined for several hours.

I looked around at the grave-faced men. I had a hunch that they were going to take charge of things themselves. I was very much in earnest and I made the best speech I ever made in my life. They listened attentively.

"Gentlemen," I began, "there were more meteors besides the one that landed in the swamp. We think that there are probably many more of the Blattids somewhere, getting ready to conquer the earth, and that those from the swamp have gone to join the others. We believe we can find their meeting place. . . . If the metal they use is a by-product of their ray machines, as I think it is, we shall find it wherever one of the machines has been used. There are no natural caverns in the alluvial soil of eastern Arkansas. The passage which the workmen discovered at the site of the mound must therefore have been an artificial one, formed with a ray machine. Now if we're right, all we have to do is go over the ground adjacent to the fire with a compass. When we are above the passage, the needle will point downward. After we have once found it, we shall be able to follow it to the end."

An elderly officer interrupted with a question. "Why should you boys do this instead of us?"

"Because the only chance to rescue Colonel Bullus, if he's still alive, is by some inconspicuous expedition that won't attract attention."

The ranking officer looked at us steadily while he tapped his teeth with a pencil. "If you should locate the Blattids, just what do you propose to do?"

"We'll let them capture us."

"What good will that do, even if they do capture you instead of using a ray gun on you?"

Then I outlined the plan Jim and I had decided might succeed. It must have impressed them, for they provided us with an army chauffeur and an engineering corps truck.

**WE** decided that if the Blattids had gathered in one place, it was probably in some great cavern, where they would be unlikely to be disturbed while they were making preparations for their warfare on humanity. There are no caverns of any kind in eastern Arkansas or western Tennessee. But in western Arkansas, in Newton and Washington counties, are enormous caves which have never been explored. Situated in the heavily wooded, sparsely settled Boston Mountains region, they would be an ideal refuge for the Blattids, where they could mature their plans undisturbed by human beings.

We were so sure that this was where they were that we confined our search for the beginning of the underground passage to the territory directly west of the burning swamp. It took us only four hours to discover a place where the needle of the compass was violently deflected. After that, all we had to do was to walk along the surface, carrying the magnetized needle. When we were directly above it, the needle pointed straight down. If we wandered to one side or the other, the needle was deflected at an angle from the perpendicular.

There is not space to tell much about that journey. The eastern part of Arkansas is mostly swamp. The

railroads west from Memphis run for miles on high embankments, and the settlements consist of unpainted wooden shacks erected on stilts. Fortunately it had been a dry season and the truck was able to find passable roads without getting too far away from us. As for us, we waded through swamps, pushed through almost impenetrable underbrush, tramped over farms and through woods, always following the deflected needle of the compass.

At night we hunted up the truck. Bill, the chauffeur, was also cook. Each day he laid in supplies, and we camped out. If we hadn't been rather heavily weighted down with the responsibility of what we were doing, it would have been a glorious adventure. As it was, I don't believe we would have traded places with any other two men in the world. The only thing we were afraid of was that the trail would give out. It seemed impossible, as day after day passed and the miles accumulated, that the Blattids could dig an underground passage so far. They were certain to encounter natural caverns as soon as they reached the hilly part of the state. Then there would be no metal to attract the compass. That was the way we reasoned, but we found out afterward that we were wrong.

Fortunately for us, wherever they traveled through natural caverns they built bridges over chasms, pavements over uneven bottoms, even guard rails of the unknown metal. Therefore our compass continued to trace the course they had taken.

Occasionally the trail would lead us to the bank of a river. We would cross and sometimes spend hours picking up the thread on the opposite side. At one place the passage ran several miles below the bed of a river, and it was two days before we picked it up again. Another time we almost gave up in despair when we could not find it after three days search on the opposite bank. Then it suddenly occurred to me that the passage might possibly have gone under the bed of the river and then turned back to the side from which it had started. We crossed back to the eastern side of the river and in a couple of hours had picked up the trail again.

This all took a great deal of time. If we had been getting the Memphis daily papers I am quite certain either Jim or I would have noticed several items of news which apparently no one else connected with the quest we were on had seen. We saw them afterward. They were telegraphed from a town called Magazine. The first one was published a few days after we started from Memphis. It read:

"Great excitement was caused in the sparsely settled Boston Mountains region by what was thought to be the awakening of an extinct volcano. The glare of the eruption could be seen for miles. The locality is almost inaccessible, but there are reports that the outpouring of lava caused destructive forest fires."

The next day there was a shorter despatch:

"The reported eruption of a volcano in the Boston Mountains is said to be probably only a display of the aurora borealis, though it is very unusual for this to be visible so far south. Scientists at the University state that volcanic activity in this part of the country is highly improbable."

We kept on day after day, slowly traveling north-

west over the Ozark plateau. The country was so sparsely settled that Bill found it difficult to buy provisions. He loaded up the truck with as much reserve supply as it could carry. As we got farther and farther into the hills, we no longer saw the unpainted cabins of the natives. The mountains and valleys were heavily wooded and there were no roads except an occasional wagon track.

Bill had been with the marines in Nicaragua. He was used to nursing a truck in rough country and repairing it without any tools except a blow-torch when it broke down. This was fortunate for us, because the truck carried the cylinders of compressed gas with which we were to fight the Blattids, if we succeeded in locating their stronghold.

This practically virgin wilderness, with its heavily wooded mountains and valleys and its great unexplored caverns under the surface, was an ideal place for the Blattids to assemble if they were planning a campaign to conquer the earth. We concluded afterward that they had intended to have all the meteors land in this region. It was due to some accident or miscalculation that one of them chanced to land in Big Eagle Swamp.

I haven't said much so far about our plan of campaign. This had been discussed thoroughly with the board of engineers before we started. Details were necessarily left to be decided by circumstances, but the plan itself was really quite simple. It had to be simple, because there was so little that two young men could do against a horde of creatures armed with unimaginably deadly weapons. The only method of attack that might prove successful, however, was one that we could use more effectively than an army. That was an instantaneously fatal gas.

Since the war, the chemical warfare department of every nation has perfected deadly gases, of which other nations know nothing. The gas we were to use was one entirely new in its effect. I must tell enough about its nature so the reader will understand our plans and what actually happened in carrying them out, and still not tell enough so the gas can be identified by the chemical warfare department of any foreign government.

In the first place, it is immensely more lethal than any gas hitherto discovered. Enough of it can be compressed in a steel cylinder six by twelve inches to destroy instantly every living thing in a city of a hundred thousand, and make the site permanently uninhabitable.

The gas itself, so far as we know, is not poisonous. What it does is to act as a catalytic and set up a chemical reaction between the oxygen and the nitrogen of the air. The oxygen and the nitrogen change in its presence to form the inert gas neon. Since neon cannot support life, all living creatures exposed to the gas instantly smother to death.

**F**OR the benefit of persons unfamiliar with chemistry, it may be said that a catalyst is a substance in the presence of which a chemical reaction takes place between two other substances which are inert to each other in its absence. The catalyst is unchanged in the process and may be used over and over again. This is why the new gas is incomparably more dangerous than any hitherto discovered. It is not dissipated nor destroyed. Released even in small quantities, it will convert all the air within the distance over which it is diffused into a gas fatal to every form of life, while itself remaining as potent as ever. The chemical warfare department of

the government has been unable so far to devise any way of neutralizing the effect of the gas when once released.

Naturally, as the air itself is destroyed, no sort of gas mask is of any use as a protection against it. It is necessary to wear an oxygen helmet. At the last conference in Memphis before we started, our plan of operations had been carefully mapped out. If we succeeded in finding the headquarters of the Blattids, we were to allow ourselves to be captured by them. Jim and I would each wear an oxygen helmet and each would carry another one in case we found any captives from the swamp battle still alive. The extra helmet was to be fastened to a belt on the left hand side, and on the right was to be attached one of the cylinders of gas which could be discharged by opening a valve. Bill was to remain behind, wearing a helmet and guarding the extra cylinders of gas.

It was a desperate plan and the chances were a thousand to one against its succeeding, but no one had been able to devise a better one. Even if we lost our lives, we ought to be able to exterminate the Blattids with us.

We did not venture to build a fire after we reached the Boston Mountains. We were sitting on the ground eating cold baked beans, after a strenuous day spent climbing up mountains through head-high underbrush and down into valleys so narrow that the sun hardly penetrated them. And cold baked beans are not very thrilling after you've eaten them for a week. We were all grumpy and disheartened as we sat there, slapping at mosquitoes which came with the darkness.

It was at that moment that we saw the flashing lights.

Jim suddenly jumped to his feet with a startled "What's that?" Bill and I turned in time to see the ray of pure white light, like an enormous searchlight, cross the sky.

The light disappeared for a moment and then thrust itself into the sky again. A red beam appeared, followed by another white and then a green and then another white. It is hard to describe exactly what happened to these lights. They appeared and disappeared so quickly that it was almost impossible for the eye to follow them. We watched, fascinated, as they flickered against the clouds.

About twelve o'clock they faded, and after talking for a while we turned in. We were convinced that we had reached the end of our journey and tomorrow would see the great adventure.

I had had an idea that I wouldn't be able to sleep, but I don't believe I was awake five minutes. The next thing I knew, Jim was shaking my shoulder. I opened my eyes and saw it was daylight.

"We'd better make an early start," said Jim.

We ate some more cold beans. Then we got out the oxygen helmets. They are a good deal like divers' helmets, except that there is attached to each an oxygen cylinder. There is a plate covering the nose and mouth which snaps shut like a door. We intended to wear the helmets with the plates open until the time came to turn on the gas. We would then close the plates and open the valves, which admitted the oxygen. Of course, if the Blattids tied us up, we'd be out of luck. Still, even then we might be able to turn on the gas, but we would die too.

Well, there was no use worrying about that. We put on the helmets and fastened the gas cylinders and extra helmets to our belts. It would have been a pretty load



to carry for any distance, but we were convinced that the place we had been hunting for weeks lay just over the mountains.

Bill was to stay hidden while we advanced and allowed ourselves to be captured. He was to wait twenty-four hours. Then, if we had not come back, he was to release the contents of the gas cylinders he carried. He was not to get near enough to risk capture, but after loosing the gas, he was to return to the nearest point where he could get in touch with the army engineers. We knew they were not at any time far behind us. The actual work we had to do, but there was an army quietly converging on this point from all directions. We were to have first chance, but if our plan failed, there were more men waiting to sacrifice their lives if necessary.

We hoped that the helmets would cause the Blattids to regard us as a new species of human beings. In that case their scientific curiosity might cause them to capture us alive and study us, rather than kill us.

We climbed the mountain before us and descended into the valley. The next range was steep and thickly wooded. The sun was now high in the sky and we were very hot and uncomfortable in our bulky helmets. We started grimly to climb, leaving Bill behind. When we reached the summit we cautiously crawled through the underbrush until we could look down into the next valley.

**I** THINK we were both dumb with astonishment for a minute or two. I had expected to see something like the mound in the swamp, and Jim says he did, too. Instead, we were looking into a broad valley, which was like a great fantastic industrial plant. The side of the mountain we were on and the opposite mountain were covered with strange-looking low buildings. Everywhere there were great cranes and curious machines. Rails and pipes led into openings in the rock. Everything was constructed of the unknown shining metal.

Even as we looked, we saw what some of the rails were for. A car, something like a railroad coach, whirled out of one of the openings in the mountain opposite. It was suspended from an overhead rail and sped across the valley and into an opening in the mountain below us. On the floor of the valley were myriads of the Blattids busily working among machines which at first we didn't recognize. We both looked at them curiously.

"There's thousands of them, whatever they are," I said.

"I know what they are!" exclaimed Jim. "Look at them! They're helicopters!"

I recognized them as soon as he spoke. Here were thousands of flying machines able to rise vertically in the air.

"It looks as if they were about ready for an attack," I said. "Good thing we got here in time."

"But my God!" exclaimed Jim despairingly, "what can we do to stop them? There's thousands of them here, and there may be thousands underground."

"It isn't us. It's what we're carrying," I said, tapping my cylinder. "They can't get along without air any better than we can. This is an enclosed valley. If we released the gas from one of these cylinders, it would probably kill all of them that we see."

"But we couldn't be sure about the others," said Jim. "And Colonel Bullus may be alive still," I continued. "I guess we'd better do as we planned."

Just then I heard a noise behind me. I turned and saw Bill. He crawled over beside us.

"You keep out of sight up here," I said. "If we're not back tomorrow morning, or these bugs down here start to get off in their flying machines, release your gas."

"It's hell staying behind," he said.

"I know, but we've got to obey orders. Be careful to keep out of sight. If they should get hold of you, it would spoil everything." We both shook hands with him, then we started to scramble down the mountainside.

We expected to be stopped at any moment. As we climbed farther and farther down without interruption, we both became nervous.

"Hope they don't turn one of their ray machines on us," muttered Jim.

I glanced down. "Look, they've seen us now," I exclaimed. We had not heard a sound, but the thousands of Blattids in the valley had stopped work and were gazing up at us. Now we saw hundreds more coming from the various openings in the mountains. These were evidently soldiers in command of officers in armor such as we had seen when we were captured at the mound.

They quickly spread out to keep us from escaping. Then several of the officers advanced toward us. Each was armed with what we recognized as the deadly ray tube, but made no move to use it. We had stopped and they stood a little way off surveying us. Even though they were undoubtedly enormous roaches, or creatures similar to that insect, there was a certain dignity about them as they stood there in their shining armor, gravely looking at us.

As I said before, we never heard them make any audible sound in communicating with one another. Evidently obeying an order, a number of the unarmored soldiers surrounded us and gently pushed us forward. The armored leaders turned toward the largest of the openings in the side of the mountain. Standing just inside at the platform was one of the overhead monorail cars, but much larger and more elaborate than the first one we had seen. The officers entered it and we and our guards followed.

The car started into the interior of the mountain. I realized that we were descending, and I suspected that our destination was the central headquarters of the Blattids. We moved so rapidly that I was unable to see very much of the passages and caverns that we passed through. I saw enough to guess that they were stupendous workshops and that I was getting glimpses of a civilization vastly more advanced than ours.

Finally the car stopped. Our guards stayed outside while we followed the officers into what looked like a great laboratory.

The Blattids working there were evidently of superior rank to the officers. They gathered round, gazing at us attentively. Our helmets particularly seemed to interest them. They walked away and had a silent consultation. Then one of them went to a machine that looked like a radio receiver with a glass plate in its front and stood before it for a few seconds. They all gathered in a group again.

"Looks as if they're waiting for something," said Jim. "Wonder what it is?"

Before I had a chance to answer, the officers at the door moved to one side. Several of the soldiers entered, pulling after them two men fastened in nets like

those in which Jim and I had been captured at the mound. The captives were naked and their faces had been so changed by the privations they had undergone, that at first neither Jim nor I recognized them.

Then their eyes met mine and I knew them.

"Don't act as if you recognized them," I said to Jim.

"I don't. Never saw them before."

"It's Colonel Bullus and Saylor."

Jim stared at them. "So it is!" he said. "What are we going to do?"

"We'll have to wait our chance."

The savants were observing all four of us closely. They were evidently unable to decide whether we belonged to the same species. Then they motioned to the guards to remove the nets from Colonel Bullus and Lieutenant Saylor. Next the two men were pushed over beside us.

"Can they understand us?" I asked the Colonel as soon as he was beside me.

"No, they're deaf. They can't hear anything."

"O. K. then. We have two cylinders of gas—I guess you know the kind—and we're going to release it. I have an extra helmet and so has Jim. Do you think you'll have time to put them on?"

"I don't know, but these fellows here are curious and they know so much, they're not afraid of anything. They're watching us talk. Maybe they'll just keep on watching."

"We'll have to chance it," I said. "I'll hand you your helmet and Jim will hand his to Saylor. If they stand around and watch us doing all that, we'll turn on the gas and try to get out. If they stop us, we'll turn on the gas anyhow."

**W**E think now that the Blattids, being deaf and entirely unfamiliar with audible speech, were taking advantage of our conversation to observe how the strange animals communicated with one another. There was a stirring of interest when Jim and I handed the extra helmets to the other two men. Just before I snapped the front plate of my helmet shut Colonel Bullus said, "If they reach for the ray guns, fall on your faces."

Still the Blattids stood expectantly watching us. They seemed so much like elderly college professors that for a moment I hesitated to turn the valve in the gas tank. Then I thought of the flying machines waiting out in the valley, and the men who had lost their lives in the swamp. I gave the cylinder valve a quick wrench.

It was at this moment, apparently, that the officers standing in the doorway suspected something was wrong. I saw two of them seize their ray tubes, but before they could elevate them, the gas got in its deadly work.

It is not pleasant to see even an insect smother to death, particularly when it is six feet high and seems almost human. The effect of the gas was almost instantaneous. All of the Blattids fell to the floor. We could not make each other hear through the helmets. I sprang toward the door, motioning to the others to follow. As we passed the group of dead officers, I reached over and picked up the ray tube that had fallen from the upraised hand of one of them.

The gas had already penetrated the caverns. All the soldiers and workmen in sight were dead or dying. The monorail car stood where we had left it. We hurried inside. I had noticed that one of the soldiers started and stopped it by pulling a lever which looked like a trolley controller. I jumped for this lever and pulled.

The car started toward the interior of the mountain. I pulled the lever back and the car stopped. Jim ran to the other end of the car where there was a similar arrangement. This time the car started toward the surface.

We joyously shook hands all around. I think we felt that our troubles were over and the Blattids exterminated. We had heard so much about the lethal qualities of the gas that we did not doubt that for a moment. I do not know that anyone had anticipated the one condition that we were up against. The gas had approximately the same density as air. It diffused with almost inconceivable rapidity on the surface and acted as a catalytic, converting into neon all the air with which it came in contact. But the diffusion upward was very slow.

Presently we were passing through caverns where the workers were going about their tasks as usual. We looked at one another in astonishment. Jim and I released more of the gas, but we didn't want to use too much. There were still thousands of Blattids alive in the valley.

In a few minutes more we saw daylight shining through the entrance in the side of the mountain, and the car came to a jarring stop. Here we made another mistake. It did not occur to us that there would probably be officers and soldiers waiting for the car. We crowded out on the platform. Facing us was a large group armed with ray tubes. They did not expect us any more than we expected them, and they gazed at us in astonishment. They must have realized there was something wrong when they saw our two companions.

Several of them reached for the ray tubes, and I knew that even if we turned on the gas, they would get us before they died. I took a desperate chance. I had in my hand the ray tube I had taken from the dead officer. I jumped in front of the others and pressed a button at the end of the tube. A ray of violet light shot out and the Blattids in front of me disappeared just as the sheriff's men had that day back on the mound. But their armor fell clattering to the ground. They were consumed, but their armor was proof against the ray. It lay in a tumbled pile where the officers had been standing a second before.

We walked out of the entrance and stood on the side of the mountain, looking down at the teeming thousands at work beneath us. I think all of us forgot for the moment the next thing we had to do. While we stood there we might very easily have been annihilated if some officer with a ray tube had spied us.

Fortunately our work was done. Even as I looked, a great shudder seemed to pass over all the creatures in the valley. They sank to the ground and never moved again. We glanced up in astonishment. Climbing down the mountain side in all directions were uniformed United States soldiers, each wearing an oxygen helmet and carrying a gas cylinder.

Colonel Bullus and Lieutenant Saylor were the only men preserved alive from the massacre at the swamp. The force there had been attacked after dark with the ray machines, against which no defence was possible. The men who still survived after the battle were executed. Then the swamp was again set afire with a large ray machine on a turntable.

The two officers were kept alive so the Blattids could study the habits of human beings. They were subjected to all sorts of experiments, though they were not tor-

tured or abused. Their main difficulty was about food. The material the Blattids consumed was absolutely nauseating to them. They got along as well as they could on various roots, which were provided for them in abundance.

The fire in the Big Eagle swamp died out the day the Blattids were exterminated. We have never found out how it was kept burning, nor indeed have we as

yet learned much about the Blattids themselves. It has been impossible to make any extensive examination of their stronghold in the remote Boston Mountains because of the gas which remains with its air-destroying properties.

Until some chemist discovers its neutralizing agent, the valley, where the helicopters were gathered, must remain closed and guarded, a place of death.

THE END