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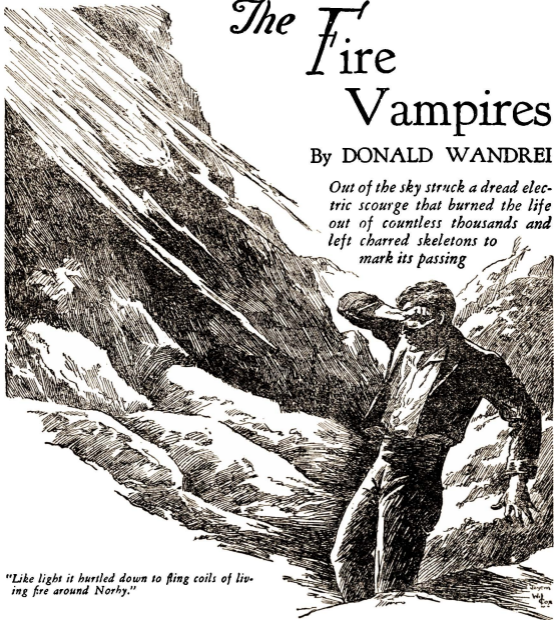
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The Fire Vampires

By DONALD WANDREI

Out of the sky struck a dread electric scourge that burned the life out of countless thousands and left charred skeletons to mark its passing



"Like light it hurtled down to fling coils of living fire around Norby."

THIS is a tale of war, and terror, and tyranny, and flaming death. It is a story that begins in the bleak abysses of space and ends upon the earth. It is the story of all mankind over a period of two decades. Yet it is also the story of one man, and one devil out of monstrous voids—but I anticipate.

I, Alyn Marsdale, venerable historian to the United Federation of Nations, have been deputed in this, the year of our Lord 2341, to chronicle the coming of the

comet; but I can not set the facts down as dead history, for the very deeds burn before my eyes and the strangeness of it all lives again. No man now existing could tell this story and remain unmoved, nor can I, though my work lies with files that gather dust, and papers that brown with age.

I shall begin with the beginning—or as much of it as we are likely to know; and I shall unfold the events as they were unfolded to us who lived through the

disaster. As we look back now, with wisdom bought at the dearest sacrifice man has ever made, we wonder how we could have been so blind, could not have put together matters that were linked. But we did not, nor are we sure how much it would have helped if we had.

The new comet was discovered by Norby—Gustav Norby, the authority on cosmic life forms. Men had laughed at some of his speculations in the old days, but they do not laugh now. It was Norby who saw the comet on July 7, 2321. It was Norby who plotted its course and sent out the news that it would pass closer to earth than any heavenly body had ever come. It was Norby who predicted that there might be danger, that attendant phenomena would be widespread, that the very existence of earth was conceivably imperiled. And it was Norby who, by right of discovery, gave his name to the new comet.

When first seen, Norby's comet lay approximately five light-years beyond the solar system. At its estimated speed of fifty thousand miles per second, it would require about eighteen years to reach earth. Consequently, the prognostications of future danger weighed lightly on the public mind. Eighteen years? Why, that was too far ahead to worry about.

Astronomers watched the distant comet through all of July and part of August. It showed up clearly as a curved nucleus, with a fan-shaped tail streaming away millions upon millions of miles behind it. Aside from its phenomenal speed, it was noticeable chiefly for its faint coloring of reddish blue.

On August 10, as the new comet was nearing the region of Alpha Centauri, astronomers were electrified by its mysterious disappearance. Not the slightest trace of it remained. It was gone, vanished as though it had never been. The public

jeered. Scientists looked puzzled as they tried to explain and could not.

On August 14, the world was stunned by the information that Norby's comet lay less than a billion miles beyond Pluto, and was approaching the sun at its former speed of fifty thousand miles per second! Within sixteen hours it would be passing the earth! Had it crossed more than four light-years of space in four days? Impossible! answered the wise men.

The world stared. Scientists everywhere were in a frenzy. It must be another comet. But how could any comet approach so close without having been observed?

At midnight of August 14 came the famous bulletin from Norby at the Mount Wilson observatory. It deserves to be quoted in full:

New comet is definitely Norby's comet, first observed on July 7. Speed again calculated to be fifty thousand miles per second. Reconstruction of theoretical path brings it to last point at which Norby's comet was seen on August 10. Only two possible explanations. One, faulty previous observation. Unacceptable because of number of independent observers and witnesses. Two, *comet suddenly increased its speed far beyond that of light and leaped across five light-years of space so fast that light-rays have not yet reached us and will not for years!* Hence mysterious apparent disappearance of comet. Comet was present but approaching so much faster than light that rays had not arrived. Intelligent control of comet by living organisms forecast. Its action otherwise unaccountable by any known laws.

(Signed) GUSTAV NORBY.

PLAINLY visible without the aid of glasses, the new comet drew the attention of anxious eyes wherever weather conditions permitted. Men felt uneasy or apprehensive. This could be no ordinary comet. Even its peculiar reddish-blue tint was different. Where primitive beliefs still survived in Africa and India and the jungles of South America, the coming of the comet was attended by a sort of wild hysteria. And in great metropolises, men could not look at the

newcomer without emotions of wonder and doubt and awe.

Hour by hour Norby's comet grew brighter, drew closer. It swung past Pluto, hurtling steadily toward the sun. Rapid calculations showed that it would come dangerously close to the earth. Its mass was not sufficient to disrupt the solar system, but there was the very gravest danger of collision, and the possibility that fatal gases would poison earth's atmosphere. By dawn, the comet was traversing the orbit of Neptune.

Radio broadcasts and television had spread the news, but the morning papers of August 15 sold like gold bricks, so eager was the public to read every shred of information about the menacing invader. Full-page headlines and flaring streamers told the story. The prophecies of disaster, the warnings of catastrophe, were printed. Norby sprang into instant fame. But what good was fame, men asked, if this were the end? Who could predict what would happen next?

A strange hush brooded over the great cities, throughout a sultry day. When the shadows of twilight darkened on the ground, men went out singly and in groups, by millions, to watch the newcomer. And long before darkness came, long before the first star shone, Norby's comet blazed forth bluish and brilliant, terribly near in the zenith, its tail sweeping fanwise in a majestic but awe-inspiring streamer of tremendous length. It was a marvel of the heavens, an omen, a prodigy that men compared to the Dark Star which had swept out of space in the Twentieth Century.

Would it wreck the earth? Would it plunge onward in its wild rush and crash flaming down upon a continent? Would it weld with the sun and cause who knew what disasters of collision or immeasurable heat? Humanity shivered at the

terrifying and menacing beauty of the comet—so near, so dreadfully near, and so radiant that all the stars were outshone, and the moon gleamed wan and feeble.

A murmur of voices swelled along city streets; in the open country was heard the restless rustle of animals, the shrill whinny of frantic horses. Night turned to a kind of day. Gigantic and supernal, the comet visibly drew nearer, grew brighter, shining like a second and larger sun with a swath of splendor trailing away millions of miles behind it.

The murmur of humanity was hushed for a minute—then swelled to a babel as television and newspapers broadcast the latest bulletin from Norby:

Unaccountable change in path of Norby's comet. At 10:41 p. m., W. S. T., comet turned at right angles from course toward earth. Estimated distance less than half a million miles. Present course in direction opposite that of earth's rotation. Too early to state whether it will become permanent satellite circling earth, or continue on a new trajectory and pass out of solar system. *No explanation for sudden deviation except control by rational beings.*

NORBY.

As night raced westward around the world, so raced the intruder. America was lighted as if by a dim day; the comet shone reflected from the Pacific like a sunken volcanic fire; it swept across Asia while priests and fakirs knelt in supplication; nothing else within memory brought out such vast crowds in the capitals of Europe. Livid and flaming, it hurtled ever westward. The passengers on trans-Atlantic liners saw it flare up from the east and blaze high overhead. It followed darkness around the world, and when it reached America again, anxious eyes saw it burn above—but *farther away*.

At midnight it was very faint over the Mississippi valley. People on the western plains could hardly discern it. They were not disappointed, for they had seen Norby's latest communication:

Comet swinging away from earth after complete circling of globe. New path will carry it out of solar system toward region of Antares. Phenomenon inexplicable. Nothing in history of astronomy to parallel it. All danger past.

NORBY.

ON THE morning of August 16, two men were engaged in angry conversation at the Mount Wilson observatory. Gustav Norby wore a look of confidence. His young assistant, Hugh Arver, was alternately skeptical and irritated.

"It's preposterous!" he burst out. "Just because a comet acts as no comet ever has behaved you think that it is controlled by intelligent beings. Why, man can no more control his own world than—I can wish myself onto Mars merely by wishing!"

"Perhaps man *will* control every movement of earth some day, Hugh," answered the older man quietly. "Remember, our civilization is only five thousand years old. And our scientific achievements are the product of only six or seven hundred years. There is no reason for thinking that our world alone contains life."

"That may be, but the surface temperature of the comet you yourself placed at about 1100° Centigrade. Why, nothing could live in such heat:"

"Nothing that we know could. But what of things that we do not know? How do you explain these?"

Norby picked up a pile of newspapers, telegrams, and radiograms. "Here are the accounts of more than *fifteen thousand* mysterious deaths last night from every country that lay under the path of the comet: America, the Philippines, China, Russia, Germany, France, Spain—a dozen others. Every death was exactly alike—a flash in the air like lightning, a man or woman who suddenly burst into flames as though by spontaneous combustion—and then, only a heap of bones. There are fifteen thousand instances of that fiery

death already known, and the reports are still coming in. How do you account for them, Hugh? Does it not seem strange that they all occurred precisely when the comet arrived?"

"What if they did? Every one expected danger if it came too close. It might easily have loosed gases or energy that somehow struck down those thousands of people."

"Did you ever hear of a gas that picked one man out of a crowd, killed him, and left the others unharmed? Did you ever hear of lightning that drifted toward a man, suddenly shot around him, and consumed him instantly, and then drifted on again? No, no, Hugh, there was method behind this, method and purpose."

"What? Whose?"

Norby shrugged. "I don't know. Wait and see."

"The comet's gone. You can't prove anything."

"The comet is gone, as you say. But suppose it returns?"

Hugh stared for a minute. Then he brightened. "It won't in our lifetime. History does not record its previous appearance. The course it followed as it left would not bring it back again for nearly a thousand years, if at all."

"If it proceeded according to natural laws. But it didn't. It crossed nearly five light-years of space in four days. It turned at right angles to its trajectory and circled earth like a satellite. Then it shot off on a still different course. It behaved as one might imagine a space-ship from Mars would behave, increasing its speed to reach earth, circling earth to survey it, and then departing home, or continuing to other worlds—*after sampling the provisions of earth!*"

"Norby! You're mad!" came Hugh's startled cry.

"I am not sure. Can you offer a better explanation?"

Hugh was silent. He was skeptical—as every one else was skeptical. Yet he thought—as hundreds of other far-sighted individuals thought, trying to understand this riddle of the skies. The comet was the greatest news item of the year—of centuries. Its mysterious arrival and departure, the peculiar and terrifying death that slew thousands of human beings in its wake, the lightning that was not lightning, exerted a spell on the imagination and yet baffled the mind with facts that were not put together. Who could put them together? It seems so easy now, and yet—

ON ANOTHER hot August day, six years later, Norby and Hugh were descending from the observatory in early afternoon. They had taken dozens of photographs by the new 800-inch reflector the preceding night, and had spent the late morning in an examination of the pictures.

"That new telescope is certainly a marvel," Norby was saying. "Why, its range is dozens of times that which the old telescope had. And Pletzka's force-tube which creates a vacuum through earth's atmosphere does away with heat-waves and all the distortions which used to trouble astronomers. Why, they would never have been able to see that new star in the Antares cluster."

"It's strange that the star didn't appear in earlier photographs."

The two men had reached the outer door and emerged into daylight. A couple of workmen were passing some hundred yards distant.

"We ought to be getting a storm tonight," remarked Hugh after gazing at the sky. "There seems to be a lot of heat

lightning around. Look at that fire-ball over by those trees."

Norby was already staring intently at the trees. A bluish striated light seemed to envelop them. Strictly speaking, it was not a fire-ball so much as a curiously motionless network of electricity.

"There's something unnatural about that lightning," said Norby. "I've never seen any—great God!"

The bluish network suddenly leaped across to the passing workmen and flung itself around them in coils of fire with two fingers of light crackling into each man's head.

A tortured shriek burst from them as from one man. An intenser flicker momentarily irradiated the network. There came two spurts of blinding, livid flame, two volumes of yellow smoke issuing up—and where the men had stood lay two calcined skeletons. For only an instant the odd lightning hung poised over the bones. Without warning it flashed toward Norby and Hugh. But the door to the observatory was sealed against it—some deep instinct had caused them to dash inside and fasten the door even as the lightning flashed.

Hugh's face was white. "Good heavens!" he gasped. "What was it? Why, that thing acted as if it were alive, like an animal springing after prey! Those men—I'll never forget them!"

Norby had a strained, queer look in his eyes as he answered, "I'm afraid you're right, Hugh, horribly right. An animal after prey—"

"But it can't be, it *can't* be! That was lightning!"

"Was it? Did you ever see lightning act like that? Have you forgotten—"

Recognition flashed into Hugh's eyes. "Norby's comet!"

"Yes. Do you recall the epidemic of deaths that occurred when the comet came

in '21? Thousands and thousands of them. And the reports—the deaths must have come about much in the same fashion as these two did. That comet has returned, Hugh, and I'm afraid for the worst. It departed toward Antares, you know, and last night we found——"

"A new star in the region of Antares!"

"Probably it was the comet. It may be within striking distance of the earth already—it must be!"

"What can we do? How can we escape if you are right?"

"We can do nothing but stay here so long as we are sealed in. The other deaths all occurred outdoors. I think we are safe for the present."

Throughout the afternoon they remained inside, yet they heard and saw the tragedy that swept its fantastic way around the world. Television brought them pictures of additional deaths. They heard the story of an electrical plague that seemed to have broken out everywhere. Hour by hour, the total of lives lost mounted. Men, women and children were stricken down in city streets, enveloped as they emerged from buildings, burned as they worked in fields, incinerated on the public highways and aboard ships at sea, slain even in aircraft. Nowhere on sea or land or in the sky was there safety. Every country in the world from Alaska to Antarctica, from Europe to Australia, reported the fiery death. Not a city of any size escaped the striated networks and the consuming bolts.

But it was at nightfall that the accumulating panic and terror swept to a climax. It was at nightfall, beginning along the Atlantic coast, and following darkness ever westward around the earth, that the incredible, monstrous, appalling truth flamed in the heavens in mile-high letters of fire.

Norby and Hugh heard the broadcast

which announced that Norby's comet had again been sighted, moving across China. They heard in stunned incredulity the account of that new phenomenon which had also made its first appearance over China. But they could not believe, they would not believe, until the afternoon had worn away, and nightfall came.

Then they saw it—the comet streaking up from the east, brilliant and bluish-red and strange, with a corona haloing it and its tail fanning away behind in a vast curve.

They saw the striations and streaks of lightning that moved innumerable through the entire heavens, so that the stars were outshone and freaked by lines of fire, *lines that moved and formed themselves into letters, words, and a message, a mile high, miles long, shining in terrible flame against the darkness behind!*

Awed and speechless, Norby stared while a strained look settled on Hugh's face. They watched the message spell itself out—a message so simple, and yet of such stupendous import to mankind.

"People of earth," it began, "you are ours by right of conquest. Henceforth and for ever you belong to us, of Ktynga, known to you as Norby's comet.

"You can not fight us, nor defeat us, nor evade us. We are superior to you in every way.

"At irregular intervals we shall return and claim as our due from twenty to fifty thousand of your inhabitants.

"We desire nothing else. But we insist upon the payment, and we shall take it. If you resist, we shall take more.

"On our next visit, we shall claim John Hanby, the president of the Federated Nations; Axel Gruno, master scientist of the world; Tsin Lo Hoy, commander-in-chief of the international army; and Gustav Norby of the Mount Wilson observatory.

"These men must place themselves in the evening of August 27, 2332, at the peak of Mount Wilson. If they are not there, we shall take a hundred thousand lives instead of twenty.

"FTHAGGUA, LORD OF KTYNGA."

"WHAT can it mean?" gasped Hugh. "It's mad! It's unbelievable! You—Norby! Why should you be chosen? It's all a hoax!"

"Easy, Hugh," answered Norby to his excited assistant. "The danger is apparently over for the present—and we have a full five years to talk. It is not a hoax."

"For God's sake, what is it?"

The older man looked tired as he replied gently, "What I have long feared and warned the public about has happened—we are threatened by invaders from outside. This may mark the passing of mankind."

"Impossible! We'll fight!"

"With what?"

Hugh was silent.

Norby continued, "We can't even reach the comet. And how are we going to fight a wholly alien form of life of which we so far know virtually nothing?"

"If it *is* life."

"It is—and life of a vicious and frightening kind."

"It *must* be a hoax, it must be! How could the creatures have known English? What sort of thing could they be? Why, there's nothing on earth to account for them!"

"True, but you forget. The message we saw appeared in Spanish over Spain, French over France, Russian over Russia, and so on. Each country read the message in its own language. Was that a joke? It was a miraculously intelligent joke, if it was. Don't forget the earlier visit of the comet. I had a theory then that no one would accept. Briefly, Hugh,

the comet is controlled by life of a sort with which we are unfamiliar, possessing knowledge and power far beyond ours. They are electrical things, pure energy that has an intelligence and reason.

"Somehow, they feed on human life, human energy. They killed thousands on their first visit. They sucked out life from living men. Vampires—Fire Vampires—that's what they are. And they sucked out knowledge, too, mind and soul and brain, so that they were able to study and master the nature of earth before they returned a second time.

"Don't ask me how they did it. I can only look at the results and guess. Somehow they feed on our life-force, spirit, energy, call it what you will. In so doing, they also absorb the entire knowledge of the victim. From the tens of thousands of people that they have now slain, they have obtained new energy for themselves, and a great cross-section if not virtually all the knowledge of earth. Man is doomed. Earth has been made into a slave-planet, owned by Fire Vampires.

"God knows where the comet's headed now—out toward its other slave-planets, I suppose, or to explore for new, inhabited worlds to subjugate. It's easy to see why they picked out Hanby and Gruno and Hoy: they are three leading minds of earth today, information that the Vampires could have sucked from almost any one of their victims. But it's also easy to see that they can not seek out and find specific victims; otherwise they would not have ordered these three individuals to be segregated in an isolated place."

"But why you, Norby? I can't understand that!"

"I think it's because they fear me. No one believed my theories and warnings, Hugh, but many people read them. The Fire Vampires probably reasoned that if I was several jumps ahead of the world in

knowing about them I might also find some means to thwart them. They could have waited while we four sacrifices were brought together, and claimed us now, but they must have had urgent reasons for departing, or else they are so confident of their power that they merely want our lives as a precaution, and can afford to wait a few years."

"What can be done? What is there to be done?"

"I don't know, Hugh, but I'm going to need you. We have five years—and a short enough time it is."

ON AUGUST 27, 2332, Norby stood again in the observatory. The intervening years had been crowded with labors and plans and projects that seemed to get nowhere. The immediate panic created by the comet had worn off the world by now, and a myriad explanations had been advanced to account for the phenomenon. The eve of its return was approaching, and excitement swelled along all the highways and cities of the world once more, excitement and uncertainty and fear.

Norby peered out from the protection of a heavy green curtain as if he were expecting some one. He looked ten years older, and a grim weight had taken its place on his shoulders. His hair was fast whitening. Wrinkles furrowed his face and forehead.

All at once his countenance brightened faintly. A few minutes later, Hugh rapped cautiously on the unused store-room that concealed Norby. The scientist admitted him.

"Did you carry it through successfully?" he asked anxiously.

"Yes. I spread word that you had fallen into the river while on an outing with me, that you had failed to come up, that I could not reach you because of the

steep banks, and that all points were to be watched for your body. I was detained several hours by the police for questioning, which delayed me, but finally released on my own recognizance."

"Good work! You are sure that my death is firmly implanted in every one's mind?"

"Yes. The television broadcasts have already gone out."

"Did you learn anything further?"

"Hanby, Hoy, and Gruno are on their way. They will be at the appointed spot by noon, without you, and firmly convinced of your death."

"If there were anything to gain, Hugh, I would be out there with them, but there isn't. In five years, the world hasn't been able to accomplish one definite thing toward repelling the Fire Vampires. If the deaths of those three men will save a needless waste of life, their martyrdom will not be wasted. The whole race is periled, Hugh, and no one man can think of himself first. But I have hopes. It's a long shot I'm taking, and if I lose, the blood of thousands will stain my hands, but if I win, the danger will be over. And your help is essential."

"You know you can count on me."

Hugh walked to the one window of their hiding-place and pulled back one edge of the curtain to peer outside. As he did so, it rolled up with a snap.

"Quick!" Norby shouted. "Pull it down again before some one see us!"

He was too late. Hugh jerked at the recalcitrant curtain, but a member of the staff passing by outside glanced up. Norby dived for a dark corner hoping he had not been seen—vain hope! A smile of recognition lighted the face of the man outside, a smile that turned to a writhe of agony as a whirling network of fire flung itself in rippling striations around him.

"They've come again!" gasped Hugh.

"And the damage is done," said Norby with a tight hardening of the lines around his mouth. "But don't blame yourself," he added as he saw the downcast look on Hugh's face. "I should have known better than to rely on those antiquated curtains."

How terribly right he was he found out as the day wore on. Twenty thousand lives if Norby, Gruno, Hoy, and Hanby were sacrificed; so the message had said. A hundred thousand if the instructions were not obeyed. By nightfall, the hundred thousand and countless more had perished in America alone. The whole fury of the Fire Vampires seemed concentrated on the country where one of their intended victims lived. And Norby knew that the Fire Vampires, in absorbing the life of the man who recognized him, had absorbed also his last impression: the figures of Hugh and himself in the store-room.

Fate had beaten him, but he would not yet give in, not even when, after nightfall, he saw another message flame in the sky, a message that announced the next return of the creatures on July 17, 2339, and threatened the extinction of all human life on the North American continent unless Norby were sacrificed. He was requested to go on that day to the same spot where Gruno and his companions had met death.

Norby regarded the message with cold, murderous eyes. With a deadly calm he called Hugh to him, then, and they prepared for part of their work. They adjusted the giant reflector to follow the comet that now blazed triumphantly in the zenith. They released Pletzka's force-tube which created an 800-inch vacuum through the air-blanket above the telescope.

And when Norby finally looked at the comet, immeasurably magnified, and near-

er by far than even the moon, he uttered a cry of surprize.

"Hugh! There's a vast structure of some sort on that white-hot surface!"

Together they stared. Dim through the aura of the comet gleamed its almost molten surface, and on it loomed a great darker spot, of fantastic architecture, dream-like, unreal, with curved angles and alien geometry of sinister beauty. But of other buildings there was no sign, and there was no trace of the Fire Vampires.

After long scrutiny, and after hundreds of photographs had been taken, Norby commented with a puzzled air, "There is something curious about this. I don't understand it. If only I could put things together!"

"What's the trouble?" asked Hugh.

"Why, there's only one building on the comet. It's as large as a city, of course, and could house many thousands of the Fire Vampires, but it seems strange. Again, isn't it rather odd that they would raid the earth and still leave no one behind, not even a guard?"

"Not so strange," said Hugh. "There may be a large number of the things still contained in the structure where of course we wouldn't be able to see them."

Norby shook his head doubtfully. Somewhere in these facts lay the weakness of the Fire Vampires, the weakness that they feared he would discover. But where? And for that matter, how could he tell, among the countless photographs of the Fire Vampires which had been taken in various parts of the world, which one was "Fthaggua, Lord of Ktynga?"

"I have it!" he suddenly shouted to Hugh. "I've found it!"

Hugh looked as if he thought his superior had gone mad under the strain. "Found what?" he queried.

"The weakness! All the Fire Vampires

are reddish—except Fthaggua, the blue one that we ourselves saw!"

"Well?"

But more than that Norby refused to divulge.

I MUST leave to others the story of the social and economic collapse that disorganized the world between 2332 and 2339. It is safe to say generally that civilization was plunged half-way toward the mire out of which it had so painfully risen. Most people came to regard the next arrival of the comet as doomsday. A sense of fatalism combined with a desire to extract every possible pleasure from the remaining years and created a prevailing chaos in which lawlessness, disorder, crime, and vice of every sort were universal. Scientists, it is true, worked feverishly in efforts to devise new weapons of destruction, to break down the atom, to control the laws of stellar mechanics, to invent space-transports which in a last resort might convey the population of earth to another planet. But the time was too short. Throughout the period, a tremendous exodus from America was under way, resulting in serious overpopulation of the nearest countries, and causing almost continual riots, struggles, and intermittent warfare.

Norby had plans—secret plans, partly because he was gambling on a long chance, partly because secrecy was imperative to his success, and partly because his life was constantly in danger. Branded as a coward and a traitor for not sacrificing himself with Gruno, Hanby, and Loy, accused of being directly responsible for a hundred thousand deaths, he found his work seriously hampered.

Somehow, with that indomitable courage that man achieves in his deepest despair, and despite the white hair which now hung above his haggard face, he carried

on. There were rumors of blasting operations around Mount Wilson—but the entire mountain was now forbidden territory by governmental decree. There were trainload after trainload of apparatus that wound their way toward the observatory—long-needed repairs were being made, was the official word.

But all the crowded events of those years must be left for other hands to record. I pass to that fateful day of July 17, 2339.

"ARE you sure you have all the directions straight?" asked Norby anxiously, as he and Hugh stood on the peak of Mount Wilson.

"Yes," and Hugh briefly repeated them.

The white-haired man nodded, and they went to their stations.

In the former peak of Mount Wilson now lay a deep crater, as though a volcanic explosion had blown its tip off. The careful dynamiting and patient camouflage that were man-made had succeeded in creating an illusion of natural eruption. Near the center of this pit was what looked like a large, flat boulder, upon which Norby took his stand.

The walls of the crater rose almost sheer for five hundred feet, and were lined to the top with a series of irregular projections and ledges. Toward the biggest of these, at the base, Hugh made his way. An observer would have been startled to watch him apparently walk through the solid rock and disappear.

From the shadow and protection of a cavern, Hugh looked out at Norby, who stood impassively on the boulder. Behind him was a labyrinth of machinery, including enormous dynamos that droned with a dull rhythm. In front of him were several instruments, an electro-interferometer for detecting the electrical charge of the atmosphere within a radius of ten

miles and a "staggered" triple switch being the most important.

The hours crawled by. A hot sun beat down on the crater. The silent waiting wrought upon the tense nerves of both men. They felt the burden of this last attempt to defeat the Fire Vampires, felt it more because they were going so largely on deduction. One slip—and the human sacrifices, the living bait that was Norby—would meet flaming death. One error—and millions of human beings would perish as an entire continent was depopulated.

So the portentous day waned, and the sun drifted overhead and burned westward, and shadows crept out farther from the western walls of the crater and lengthened upon the jagged floor, and twilight approached. Still there had come no trace of the Fire Vampires. Into Hugh's thoughts came a hope.

Perhaps they would not come! Perhaps the comet had broken apart in the outer reaches of space—perhaps it had been defeated by a superior race somewhere in the cosmic voids—perhaps it had even put up a bluff and had never intended to return!

As darkness came on, Hugh's hope grew stronger. The strain of the day had been great, he felt very tired, and every passing minute meant an increasing chance of safety.

He glanced again at the mercury mirror that, beneath tons of rock, still reflected the heavens.

And there shone the comet, flashing into sight huge and brilliant, as though it had materialized out of nothing.

"Norby! It's come!" he shouted. His weariness dropped from him like magic.

He looked at the electro-interferometer. Its pointer was jumping and swinging madly.

Then he looked up across the crater

and his heart skipped a beat. A vast mass of bluish lightning drifted ominously above the pit, as though suspicious, yet hungry for prey. In the darkness, Hugh could not make out Norby's reaction, and if the worst happened, he did not want to witness Norby's fate.

The sinister thing poised far above its victim, contracted—and like light hurtled downward to fling coils of living fire around Norby.

Hugh's hand, already resting on the staggered switch, threw it shut with a convulsive movement that brought three sharp staccato clicks.

At the first click, Norby dropped from sight through a trap-door while streamers of bluish energy ravened furiously where their prey had vanished.

At the second click, a solid sheet of fire shot across the upper rim of the crater, closing it completely with a roof of blazing incandescence.

The bluish Fire Vampire suddenly sensed danger and leaped upward—too late. Like a trapped animal, it halted at the solid flame that shut it in. A sound like a piercing cry, a noise like a hiss, emanated from it.

At the third click, from a hundred points on those jagged ledges shot a hundred roaring bolts of electricity—ten-million-volt streams that thundered and spluttered and crackled, crisscrossing the entire crater with a hell of surging power. In that mad and frightful glare, to the deafening crash of giant bolts, Fthaggu, the blue Fire Vampire, twisted in a frantic effort to escape. Only for an instant were its thrashings visible—only till that moment when the roaring electricity crackled through it, and there came a titanic flash as of a cosmic short-circuit, and a blackness of blackness followed.

And all over the world there swept a flash in the skies and a flame on the

ground, every Fire Vampire was seen to writhe in torment and disappear in a spurt of diffused incandescence.

THUS the Fire Vampires passed away—passed away for ever, leaving behind them only the comet that is now a satellite of earth, with an identical rotation period, so that every night it blazes above the eastern horizon and trails high across the heavens.

Before me, as I write, lies a communication from Norby, in answer to a request of mine. It seems most fitting to close this record by an extract from that mis-sive.

"You ask me how the Fire Vampires were beaten," he replies. "I can only say that it was by guesswork and good fortune as much as by knowledge.

"Several facts that I had gathered impressed me. Why was there only *one* building on the comet? Why were there no guards left behind? Why were all the Fire Vampires *red* except one that was *blue*?

"A thought came to me—one of those guesses in the dark. The answer is, I said to myself, that the blue Vampire is Fthaggua, Lord of Ktynga. And there is

only *one* Fire Vampire in all! Somehow, this monstrous ab-human entity grew up as a unit composed of individuals, a disconnected organism that nevertheless might die if its main member were killed. That main member, I reasoned, must be Fthaggua. All the red Fire Vampires were limbs, tentacles, parts, as it were, able to behave like separate individuals within a limited territory, but bound by invisible ties of energy to the parent.

"If my speculations were true, then we would only need to destroy Fthaggua, and the other countless parts of this weird organism would of necessity likewise perish. And since the thing was pure energy, I reasoned that pure energy might short-circuit it, or diffuse it, "ground it," in the terms of earth-science. Together, Hugh and I worked out the details, concealing anodes and cathodes for carrying an enormous charge all around the crater. The results you know.

"The danger is past. Yet I can not help feeling a certain respect for an entity that almost made good its huge bluff, that almost succeeded in its pretense that there were millions of Fire Vampires when there was really only one—Fthaggua, Lord of Ktynga."

