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FARNSWORTH WRIGHT, Editor.

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The FLOWING DEATH

By ARLTON EADIE

"Where am I?" he asked faintly.

"**H**AROLD! Harold! I really think Uncle has discovered something at last!" came in loud, excited accents from the terrace overlooking the tennis-court.

I paused in the act of tightening the net, and looked up at the entrancing vision in white leaning over the stone balustrade.

Speaking candidly, the news she had just announced failed to awake in me anything like the surprize and delight that it evidently had done in her. When a man, old enough to know better, spends the whole of his days—and occasionally half his nights—messaging about with mysterious concoctions in a laboratory whose unspeakable atmosphere would at times leave a soap-factory a very bad second, it is scarcely surprizing if, in the course of time, he does "discover something." But when I hinted as much to Mavis it did not have much effect in dampening her enthusiasm.

"But I think it must be something really important this time," she persisted. "He did not remain in his laboratory later than half past 10 last night, and he ate his breakfast this morning after being only twice reminded that it was getting cold. And he has just asked me to tell you that he wishes to see you in the laboratory at once."

I may as well confess that what scientific knowledge I happen to possess is of the most sketchy description. The only recollection I treasure of the much-boomed technical course of my school days is the manufacture of hydrogen (or was it oxygen?) on a non-commercial scale over a bowl of water. Probably I should not have remembered even that, had it not been for the painful after-effects of the explosion which ensued on the application of a lighted match to the stuff at the conclusion of the experiment. But with Professor Owen

Boyd-Phulger, Sc. D., LL. D., F. R. S., F. S. A., the case was, naturally, different. The only things he didn't know about chemistry and biology were the things that hadn't been discovered! But the fact that several learned societies had allowed him to tack half the alphabet behind his name did not prevent the man himself from being a well-meaning, but none the less deadly, bore. It may give some slight indication of the depth of my affection for his niece when I say that it was solely to be near her that I witnessed innumerable intricate, but to me unintelligible, experiments and submitted like a lamb to form the audience to the old fossil's interminable lectures. Indeed, so well had I played my part that he had at last come to regard me as being as much interested in his beloved researches as he was himself; with the result that he now confidently expected me to forego a set with the dearest little girl on earth in order to listen to yards of his twaddle in a stuffy laboratory. Truly has it been said that duplicity brings its own punishment!

Something of the nature of my inward musings must have betrayed itself on my face, for there was a glint of mischievous amusement in Mavis' eyes as she went on: "I'm afraid, however, that you'll soon have to tear yourself away from the scientific atmosphere you love so much! I shall send an urgent message for you in about twenty minutes."

"Remember, that's a promise!" I retorted, as I made my way toward the house.

THE moment I entered the laboratory I could see that Mavis had not exaggerated the importance of the occasion. Instead of being in his customary state of dreamy absent-mindedness, the old boy was dancing about all over the place. As a rule I find it politic to encourage him to do most of the talking, but on this occasion

there was not the slightest need for any such exercise of tact. Before I could utter a word he had jammed me down on a most uncomfortable wooden seat in front of a high-power microscope.

"I shall be famous, Harold—famous!" He appeared to be almost hysterical with delight as he chortled out the words. "I have made the discovery of the century—nay, more—the greatest discovery of all time! Look for yourself, my boy!"

I accordingly looked, but all I could make out was a small, irregular-shaped blob of dirty-looking gray jelly. Having been prepared to behold something really exciting, I experienced a distinct sense of having been sold, and I had a good mind to tell him so. On second thought, however, I contented myself with inquiring what the thing was.

Instead of returning a simple answer to my simple question, the old fossil must needs lean over the bench as though he were addressing a conclave of highbrows, clear his throat, and launch into a lecture.

"Of all the problems that have exercised the mind of mankind since the first glimmerings of the dawn of science, there is none that has been the cause of so much research, controversy, and—I regret having to add—bitterness, as the problem of the origin of life. I have only to mention the illustrious names of Huxley, Von Bunge, Schwann, Balbiani, Roux and Le Dantec"—he rolled the names round his mouth as though he relished the taste of them—"to convince you that some of the finest intellects in Europe have been brought to bear on the subject. Yet, in spite of this, the solution seemed as remote as ever until I made my startling discovery last night."

That made me open my eyes a little. "What?" I exclaimed; "you mean that you have solved the problem yourself?"

The professor shook his head. "My

dear Harold," he answered, with an almost pitying smile, "I should have thought that even the most superficial acquaintance with the English tongue would have told you that my words were intended to convey no such claim. Are you not aware that the immortal Darwin himself had declared that one might as reasonably seek for the origin of matter as that of life?"

Frankly, I had not been aware of the fact. But I thought it best to let him ramp on in his own sweet way in order not to prolong the interview.

"What I have succeeded in doing," he went on presently, "is to determine the actual living protoplasm which is the physical basic material of which ourselves and all other living things on this planet are composed. Even your intelligence will grasp the fact that to discover the bricks of which a building is composed is a very different thing from determining how those same bricks came to be in existence. That simple analogy applies to my discovery. I have separated the highly complex material which forms the basic principle of life; I have ascertained that it is composed of millions of microscopic animalcules which live, breathe, assimilate food and multiply—but the great problem of how this protoplasm came originally to be endowed with life remains as far from solution as ever."

A flash of inspiration came to me. "The cell theory!" I cried; and the old man's beaming face told me that my chance shot had indeed hit the mark.

"You're right, Harold. Ah, I have hopes yet — hopes," he muttered, rather inconsequentially, I thought. "Yes, it is the cell theory, as you say. But it is the cell theory adapted and changed."

I thought it best not to jeopardize my newly-won laurels by venturing another suggestion; so I contented

myself with murmuring "Really?" in as impressed a manner as possible.

"The organism you have just examined in that microscope — if, indeed, one may so describe a speck of matter which, though undoubtedly alive, possesses neither heart, lungs, stomach, brain nor even skin, consisting as it does of one homogeneous substance — this animalcule represents the earliest, the lowest, the most simple and primitive form of life yet known to science. I am of course aware that several similar organisms have been previously discovered; in fact, one species of ameba, the *Proteus animalcule*, is quite a common object observed under the microscope. It abounds in stagnant ponds, or may be readily acquired by infusing ordinary hay in water and allowing it to stand. But these"—he waved a triumphant hand in the direction of the things I had been looking at—"are a species of infusoria entirely different. Not only do they transcend all others in their tenacity of life and the extreme rapidity with which they multiply, but they are infinitely more adaptable to their environment and the conditions of food obtainable—I was almost about to say more educative. It is an absolute fact that in the short space of three years I have transformed this animalcule from a vegetable-consuming species to a carnivorous one."

"Impossible!" I exclaimed, thinking that some expression of wonder at his achievement was evidently expected of me. "Professor, you're a marvel!"

Professor Boyd-Phulger reddened like a young girl at her first compliment.

"You see, everything was in my favor," he explained diffidently. "My success is not so surprizing when you consider the extreme rapidity with which they increase and the simplicity of their bodily structure. They have no highly specialized organs

needing to become adapted, as have other animals higher in the scale. To such a pitch of perfection have I brought them"—he fingered the jar containing the loathsome stuff almost lovingly as he held it up for my inspection—"that they will assimilate almost anything in the way of animal food. But you shall see for yourself."

Disregarding my hasty assurance that I would be only too pleased to accept his word on the subject, he directed me to apply my eye to the instrument while, with a pair of delicate forceps, he placed an infinitesimal scrap of meat on the observation slide.

"Now observe what happens," he said, with the air of a conjurer performing his star trick.

FOR a while it seemed as if nothing were going to happen. The shapeless outline of the ameba remained inert and motionless, and near its outer edge I could see the smaller, pinkish speck which represented the meal the professor had so kindly provided for its enjoyment. But it did not seem as if the giddy little animalcule felt peckish that afternoon. I was just on the point of venturing a remark to that effect, when I began to notice a slight movement in the thing. Then, so slowly that at first the motion could scarcely be detected, but with ever-increasing speed, a slender feeler-like mass took form and slid out from the side nearest the morsel of food. With a kind of horrible, blind purposefulness it encircled its meal, the creature's body moving forward as it did so; until at last it had entirely enveloped it. For a time I could see the speck of meat through the semi-transparent, jelly-like substance of its body; then it rapidly grew fainter, fading away like a lump of sugar in a tumbler of water, until finally it disappeared altogether.

"The food has been assimilated," explained Professor Boyd-Phulger.

"In a moment the organism will divide in two. That is how these protozoa multiply—by simple fission."

Even as he spoke, a cleft appeared across the body of the ameba—if one may use such a term in respect of a thing which might be equally correctly described as being all body or possessing none at all—and presently it completely divided.

Boyd-Phulger laughed as he noted the astonishment pictured on my features.

"That process will go on indefinitely," he told me, "and it invariably takes place more rapidly after the organism has eaten. You can see for yourself that, in place of the single ameba there are now two. One can hardly call them mother and daughter, for the terms could be interchanged with the same amount of truth. Those two will divide into four, the four into eight, the eight into sixteen; until—provided a plentiful supply of animal food be procurable—you will have the thousand splitting into two thousand, the million into two million, and so on indefinitely. I assure you that the rapidity with which they increase is little short of marvelous. They are the simplest, the most primitive, and the most prolific organism on this globe. And they are immortal—"

"Immortal?" I echoed, staring.

"Inasmuch as they never die," asserted the professor solemnly. "They merely divide, each half continuing to live until it in turn divides. There is for them no death as we know it. It really seems as if these lowly creatures, alone of all the myriads of varieties of created life, continue to put off forever the payment of the debt of nature."

I stared again at the two motionless gray specks. I was bewildered and only half credulous. How could it be possible for living matter to go on living, feeding, multiplying forever? The professor must have

sensed my skepticism, for he continued eagerly:

"I assure you that what I state is correct. The contents of these jars"—he reached up and took one off the row of shelves as he spoke—"are destined to live forever. Although each individual is, of course, indistinguishable by the naked eye, there are literally millions of amebas within this jar."

I took the jar in my hand and gazed at the contents, fascinated almost in spite of myself. Then a sudden thought struck me.

"Here, I say," I remarked, "if what you've told me is correct—about them being fond of animal food, and increasing so quickly, you know—then it would be jolly awkward if——"

"Harold," interrupted Mavis' voice from the other side of the door, "are you ready to play that set you promised?"

"Rather!" I cried eagerly. "Please excuse me, Professor."

I hastily handed the glass jar back to him—so hastily, indeed, that it slipped through his fingers and smashed into fragments on the tiled floor.

"I'm awfully sorry," I said. "I suppose I've killed all your little animalcules." And, like a fool, I went down on my hands and knees to scrape the filthy things up.

"Oh, they are not so easy to kill," laughed the professor easily. "But you need not worry about them. I have plenty more—and they increase like wildfire."

Later on I had good reason to know that he spoke the truth!

NIGHT was already beginning to fall when I quitted the professor's house to return home—a night heavy, hot, and windless, with a threat of approaching rain in the low-lying clouds to the north.

But I was in no mood to criticize the weather. Between the time of my

accident in the laboratory and my departure I had found opportunity to put the greatest question of all to Mavis—and her answer had certainly not been in the negative. I trod on air as I turned off the main road and struck into the narrower one which runs athwart the crest of Shooters Hill, on whose summit the professor's house stands. Half-way along I came to a halt and, leaning over a low fence stretching between two of the villas which line the road, lighted a cigarette. The ground here stands extremely high, and the prospect below lay spread almost maplike before me. Beyond the jumble of houses which covers the lower slopes of the hill on this side lay the denser mass of roofs, topped here and there by some spire or clock-tower, marking the site of the busy town of Woolwich. Directly ahead, the rays of the rising moon silvered the streak of the distant Thames as it showed here and there in its winding course. Beyond that again, the serried rows of masts and funnels spoke of the crowded docks on the northern shore.

Lights began to appear from the street-lamps and houses below as I stood smoking and musing over the events of the day. Although I, as an accepted lover, should have been in the seventh heaven of delight, I was conscious of a feeling of gloomy apprehension. Try as I might, I could not shake off the recollection of what I had viewed through that confounded microscope. There had been something so horribly repulsive in that slow, emotionless, yet remorseless seeking of food by those "educated" amebas, that I found myself involuntarily shuddering at the thought of it. Could it be possible that Professor Boyd-Phulger was right, and this thing, without brain, stomach, nerves, or even heart, was in reality the first beginning of all known life?

And as I mused thus, I recalled to mind the remark of the professor when I had smashed the jar: "They

are not so easy to kill . . . and they increase like wildfire. . . .”

The words were still ringing through my brain when at last I turned to resume my homeward journey; but little did I dream of the seeds of widespread death and destruction which were even at that moment hatching at their fell maturity within the house I had just quitted.

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I DID not go near the professor's house for a week after that night. When I explain that Mavis was also absent on a visit to relatives in Scotland, the intelligent reader may perceive cause and effect in the two circumstances. Consequently it was not until the morning of the seventh day that I became aware that anything was amiss. The professor himself brought the news. He burst in upon me unannounced as I sat at my solitary breakfast. Knowing his usual punctiliousness in matters of dress, I stared open-mouthed at the figure he presented. He had not shaved that morning; his tie was awry and his vest half-buttoned; his frock coat and trousers were smeared with dried mud. But it was the look of frozen horror on his ashen features which struck me dumb with a sense of impending calamity.

For a moment we remained staring at each other. Then, with something like a dry sob in his throat, he lurched forward and fell into the chair I pushed toward him.

“A terrible thing has happened,” he gasped. “Those amebas—you remember the jar you smashed?—they have increased enormously—the grounds are swarming with them—I can do nothing! And——” He broke off abruptly in his almost incoherent explanation, shuddered, and sank his head upon his arms, too overcome to continue.

“Yes, yes!—go on. What else?” I prompted, fearing I know not what.

“They—they've commenced to eat things!” he answered with a kind of dull helplessness.

“Things? What kind of things?”

“Living things: chickens—the dog in the next house—and—my God! Harold—there's a child missing from next door but one! They haven't seen it since yesterday evening. They do not suspect the truth as yet, but I'm morally certain those cursed amebas have got it—would to heaven I had never set eyes on the things! It's terrible!—terrible!”

I could distinctly feel the hair rising at the back of my scalp. “You really mean to say that slimy stuff has devoured a child?” I asked.

A travesty of a smile twisted his trembling lips. “They've proved my theory, all right; they've accustomed themselves to their environment fast enough. They're adaptable—oh yes!—infernally, fiendishly adaptable!” And he gave vent to peal after peal of shrill, mirthless laughter.

I quickly crossed to the sideboard and poured out a stiff glass of the only restorative I had handy. He appeared calmer after I had persuaded him to drink it off, and a little color began to steal into his ashen face. Then, by dint of much questioning, I got the account of what had happened.

It seems that he had not attached the slightest importance to the smashing of the jar containing the amebas; he had allowed the fragments, with their slimy contents still adhering, to lie there until his man-servant had swept them up and deposited them in the dust-bin with the other rubbish. During the following days he had been busily engaged on the monograph which was to announce his discovery to the world. To the liberated amebas he never gave a single thought.

“I simply forgot all about them, Harold,” he explained with an almost pathetic simplicity. “Even when Timson came to me with tales about the mysterious demise of his chickens,

I did not suspect the truth. I went to bed that night without the slightest misgiving. I arose early, and, happening to glance from my window, I saw what appeared to be a heavy frost on the stone edging of the lake and the lawns which adjoin. A moment's reflection, however, convinced me that this could not be the explanation of the strange, grayish-white hue which covered everything. At the same moment I perceived that the ground itself seemed to be in motion. It was a slow, steady, billowing movement, slight but unmistakable—something like the flowing of the tide upon a river. As I looked the horrible truth burst upon me! It was my amebas increased and multiplied beyond measure!

“Instantly I connected their augmented numbers with the fate of the chickens and the dog next door, and hard upon this discovery came the full realization of the gravity of the matter. Now that these things were loose, given sufficient moisture and food—and you know how much rain we have had lately—there would be no saying where they would end. They must be destroyed immediately. But how?”

“My heart sank as I looked at the slowly moving, slimy mass—there must have been millions upon millions of the creatures there. They had enjoyed a week of unrestricted freedom, remember; and you have seen with your own eyes how rapidly the things increase. Clearly I must act at once if I were to avert the consequences of my folly.

“I dressed, throwing on my clothes anyhow; then I descended to the margin of the lake. Such was the state of consternation into which my unexpected discovery had thrown me, that I did not even realize the personal danger I courted in placing myself within reach of that teeming horde of hungry organisms. It was not until—following that unerring instinct to move toward animal food which the

things possess—a stream of them was approaching to cut off my retreat, that I saw my peril. I fled, and at once determined to come to you for your advice and help.

“But there was another shock awaiting me. The first person I encountered on emerging from my front gate was the maid from the house two doors away. She was about to call on me to inquire if I had seen anything of their little girl, who had not been seen since she went out in the garden to play the previous evening. I suppose I must have mumbled some reply to her question—heaven alone knows what I said!—then I pushed past her and hurried off. The girl was still staring after me when I looked back from the corner of the road. I am positive she must have suspected something. You must come back with me, Harold, at once. If those things get beyond my grounds there is no saying what mischief they will do!”

It was only with the greatest difficulty that I persuaded the agitated man to swallow a little breakfast; after which we at once set out for Shooters Hill. Before leaving, however, an instinctive desire to take some weapon assailed me. I accordingly made my way to my bedroom, loaded an old revolver I happened to possess, and slipped it into the side pocket of my coat; though exactly of what use that would have been against a swarm of microscopic creatures was not quite clear in my mind.

THE wild fears to which my mind had been a prey during the journey began to abate as we drew near the professor's house. Everything seemed as usual. It was still early in the morning; there had been rain overnight, and the newly burst foliage showed up fresh and green in the bright spring sunshine. Below, somewhere in the marshy woods to the right, a thrush was warbling as though in answer to the clear notes of a lark in the cloudless blue above.

Except for the songs of these feathered minstrels a deep and peaceful quiet reigned.

The house also appeared unchanged; not a trace of the gray slime could I detect either on the well-kept lawns or graveled pathways. The professor must have guessed the unspoken suspicion in my mind as I looked toward him.

"No, it was not a delusion," he assured me hastily. "The stuff was there all right; the question is—where is it now? The amebas have a great partiality for water, and I confess I am surprized that they should have quitted the vicinity of the lake. I wonder if it is possible——" He broke off short and pointed excitedly. "Yes! Look there!"

A narrow, but deep, ditch ran along the edge of the woods, and from it, barely discernible against the darker gray of the roadway, there overflowed a dully glistening stream which I knew could be nothing else but the dreaded slime. In itself the thing did not appear very alarming; in fact, from where we stood it might have passed entirely unnoticed were it not for the luster of its surface where it reflected the rays of the sun. Yet it covered the road from side to side and stretched downhill as far as the eye could reach.

The professor drew in his breath sharply.

"There it is," he said. "Luckily there is not much traffic so early in the day, otherwise——"

As he spoke we heard the sound of a motor ascending the opposite side of Shooters Hill. It must have been traveling at considerable speed, in spite of the steepness of the incline, for it came into sight over the crest almost immediately—a big green limousine resplendent with glittering fittings and immaculate enamel.

"We must stop them!" Boyd-Phulger cried, suddenly awakening to action. The next moment we were both standing in the track of the on-

coming car with arms outstretched. It came to a standstill with grinding brakes, and a bloated, black-bearded face appeared at the near-side window.

"Vat 'sh matter, Morry?" the face inquired, addressing the driver in an accent certainly not acquired in these islands. "Vat 'sh stopping for?"

Professor Boyd-Phulger came forward, gesticulating vaguely.

"You can not go on," he cried. "It's not safe."

"Vat d'ye mean—not safe?" demanded the man at the window.

"Why, I've been down this hill hundreds of times," put in the liveried chauffeur with a grin. "It's as safe as houses!"

"But not now," the professor answered. "I assure you it is dangerous now."

The driver turned from regarding us and looked down the hill. "It's a clear road," he declared.

The professor shook his head. "It is far from being a clear road," he said gravely. At the same time he stepped nearer and laid his hand on the handle of the door.

"What's the matter with it, anyway?"

"There is death on it!"

"Vot's on it?" The passenger was palpably startled—as well he might be.

"Death!" repeated Professor Boyd-Phulger solemnly.

There was a pause in the conversation after this. Then another voice was heard, coming from the interior of the car.

"I'm surprized at you vasting time listening to a drunken cadger like 'im," came in thick, but unmistakably feminine accents. "Don't yer know ve're late already?"

The professor recoiled a pace and his face changed.

"You think I am drunk?" he asked very slowly.

The face at the window grinned. "Eider dat or mad."

I think it must have been at this moment that the professor realized for the first time the figure he was cutting; unshaven, dirty and disheveled, with his muddy frock-coat flapping in the wind. I thought it high time to intervene.

"It's quite true." I came forward as I spoke. "You can not possibly proceed."

The man's fat-encircled eyes narrowed to two suspicious slits. "You'd better be careful, young feller," he shouted truculently. "Dere's a police-station at der bottom of the hill."

"But you'll never live to reach it if you attempt to go on!" interrupted the professor, and his words must have sounded like a threat in the other's ears.

"A hold-up, eh?" He drew back from the window as he rapped the words out. "Ve'll soon see about that!"

"For heaven's sake be advised——" I began; then my voice died away in dismay. In pulling out my handkerchief to wipe the moisture from my forehead I had inadvertently caught my finger in the trigger-guard of the revolver, with the result that the luckless weapon came clattering out on the roadway in full view of everybody.

"Drive over der scoundrels, Morry!" came the terrified roar to the driver, and I must admit that the man made a zealous effort to obey.

The near wheel missed me by inches as I sprang back when the car jerked into motion. The next instant it was swooping downhill as swiftly as its unbraked wheels could carry it.

"I tried to stop them—I did my best—didn't I, Harold?" wailed the professor, wringing his hands in hopeless despair. Then he suddenly fell silent, and together, like men entranced by some grim tragedy on the stage, we watched the progress of the rapidly dwindling car.

From our station on the brow of the hill we could see every detail of

the scene which ensued. Swiftly and noiselessly as a swooping bird, the limousine drew nearer to the fatal stretch of roadway. At the last minute something of his previous cocksureness must have evaporated from the driver's mind. No sooner had he crossed the margin of the slime than he applied his brakes suddenly. The car swerved, and then stopped. At such a distance it appeared to us no larger than a toy; the driver, as he alighted to ascertain what was amiss, looked like a tiny shadowgraph figure outlined against the shining background. We saw him stoop, and finally kneel down by the rear wheel. The next instant he was on his feet again, slipping, staggering, waving his arms wildly as though he battled with unseen foes.

Presently he was down again, this time full-length. Again and again he rose from that slimy mass, and after each fall it seemed to my excited imagination that the man was literally disappearing before our eyes, though it was probably merely the accumulating layer of slime on his uniform that made it appear so. Slower and slower grew his movements, until at last he fell and rose no more. At the same moment the other occupants emerged from the interior of the car. . . .

I averted my eyes. I had seen enough. When I took courage to look again the road appeared to be empty. Except for the derelict car at the foot of the hill the whole thing might have seemed but a ghastly nightmare.

A trembling grip upon my arm recalled me to myself.

"Quick!—pull yourself together!" cried the professor. "You must get downhill and warn the town before the slime reaches it."

"Downhill?" I repeated dully. "There?" I shook my head impatiently, for it seemed as if he were sending me to certain death.

"Not by that road," he explained quickly. "There are other ways of

reaching Woolwich. You must 'phone the Home Office from the first public call-box you pass. Then make your way to London and explain personally to the authorities. For myself, I must return to my laboratory."

"That may be dangerous," I objected. "If any of the slime is still remaining there——" I completed the sentence with a significant shrug.

But the professor was not to be deterred. "I have brought this menace into existence, and it is my duty to find some means of destroying it; otherwise the stuff will depopulate London."

"Barriers could be erected——" I began.

"Barriers?" cried Boyd-Phulger with a snort of contempt. "These organisms are capable of ascending a perfectly perpendicular surface. No mere mechanical means will prevent their progress toward the food they covet. But we are wasting precious time. Get to your task of warning the metropolis, and I will get to mine. Good-bye!"

Then he turned and left me without another word.

3

THE result of my endeavors to warn the authorities of the threatened peril may be summed up in two words: utter failure. First of all I called at Scotland Yard and told my story; but all they did was to read me a long lecture on the by-law which deals with straying farm stock.

"... and of course all ferocious animals have to be under proper control whilst on the public highway," the official wound up gravely. "You'll be liable for any damage done by these here—what-d'ye-call-'em—ham-bones?"

"Amebas," I corrected.

He scratched his head with the handle of his pen. "Never heard of sech things," he confessed. "How many of them have got loose?"

"Oh, a few hundred millions," I answered wearily.

The man regarded me fixedly for a full minute. "How big are they?" he then asked.

"You would need a strong microscope to distinguish each one——" I commenced to explain, but he cut me short by rising suddenly to his feet.

"That's enough!" he told me sternly. "You'll find yourself in the wrong shop if you try to play your practical jokes here!"

Then he ordered me out and called a constable to accelerate my departure.

Though I fared no better at the Home Office, the clerk there was more tactful in his incredulity. At any rate he condescended to take my name and address before dismissing me with what was evidently his stock phrase.

"Your communication will be attended to in due course," he assured me blandly. "Good-morning."

As a last desperate resort I tried the newspaper offices—and narrowly escaped being arrested as a wandering lunatic. Weary and disheartened, I resolved to return to Shooters Hill.

I bought an early edition of an evening paper in Cannon Street Station, and scanned its pages eagerly during the journey down. The fact that there was no mention of the appearance of the slime raised my hopes considerably, though I could see that the brief account of the "Motor Fatality on Shooters Hill" referred to the tragedy I had witnessed that morning. But the moment I alighted at Woolwich Arsenal Station I noticed signs that something unusual was afoot. There was a knot of khaki-clad infantrymen lounging about the door of the waiting-room, whilst one of their number, in full equipment down to steel helmet and gas mask, marched up and down the platform with fixed bayonet.

It seemed that gun-fire had been heard during the afternoon, coming

from the direction of the Common, and everybody was talking about the cordon which the military had drawn round Shooters Hill, diverting all traffic, including the tram and motor services. My cautious inquiries went to show that the general public had no suspicion of the real state of affairs.

"Manoovers—that's what it is," declared one man with whom I entered into conversation. "The sojers have been marchin' about and firin' all the arfternoon. I heard 'em meself. Foolishness I calls it—sending all the traffic miles out o' their way a busy day like this. Just red tape and foolishness."

Further inquiry on my part elicited the fact that it was no unusual occurrence for the military to perform their evolutions on the stretch of common which abuts on Shooters Hill; consequently the firing and warlike preparations had occasioned no alarm.

On quitting the station, I found the usual Saturday market to be in full swing in the adjoining Beresford Square. Turning to the right, I walked up the hill between the barracks until I came to the picket which held the road. For a while I chatted with the sergeant in charge; but he either could not, or would not, give me any inkling of what was going on.

"Road stopped, sir; C. O.'s orders," was all I could get out of him; so, mainly to distract my thoughts, I retraced my steps to the crowded market-square; afterward wandering into the side streets where old clothes, catables, cheap drapery and mock jewelry were being noisily vended. At one corner a quack doctor was holding forth the merits of his highly colored cure-all; at another, a Salvation Army band added its music to the clamor.

It was while I was listening to the witticisms of a raucous-voiced cheap-jack that I became aware of the sound of rapidly approaching hoof-beats. The next moment a party of cavalymen came galloping down Wellington

Street, shouting their loudest as they rode:

"Clear out! Get out of the way!" they were crying. "The slime!—the slime is coming! The slime!"

Those in the crowd stared at them uncomprehendingly.

"Wot's the trouble nah?" asked a man near me.

"Blimy! is it anuvver war?" ventured another.

"The slime!—the slime is coming!"

Uselessly the soldiers repeated the words as they forced a passage with their horses through the crowd. As they came nearer I saw that each man wore his gas mask in position. This puzzled me at the time, for it was only later that I learned of the futile attempt that had been made earlier in the evening to destroy the advancing swarm by means of poison gas. The soldiers passed out of sight in the direction of Plumstead Road, still repeating their monotonous slogan, and in the path they had made I forced my way through the press until I reached a spot where I could obtain an uninterrupted view of the direction whence they had come. This was a long, straight, inclined thoroughfare stretching up toward Woolwich Common and the barracks, forming one of the main streets of the town.

FOR a time I could see nothing unusual; then, as I continued to look, I noticed the people on the pavements turning and gazing up the hill.

A woman at my side suddenly addressed me. "Wot's up, guvnor?" she whimpered. "'Ave they all gone barmy? Wot wiv—"

A hoarse murmur of apprehension from a thousand throats broke in upon her words. A yard-high tide of gray had come into sight on top of the hill and was creeping downward toward the densely packed crowd below. The murmur swelled louder and ever louder; cries and shrill screams began to mingle with it. On the hill before

us people were running—slipping—falling. . . .

“Run! run!—all of you!” I shouted to those around me, and tried with hurried words to make them understand their danger. But for all the attention they paid I might just as well have saved my breath. For ten precious minutes I wasted my warnings on the air, and all the while the sea of slime rolled down toward us. Not until it had passed the Hippodrome did I bethink myself of my own safety. Then I turned to the right and ran in the direction of the Free Ferry Pier, intending to lose no time in putting the width of the river between myself and that deadly, creeping mass.

Well it was for me that I acted in time. I was barely half-way along Powis Street when a long-sustained crying arose from the direction of the square I had just quitted. Commencing with a low wail, it rose abruptly to a shrill crescendo of mortal fear, punctuated every now and again by a sharp staccato rattle of rifle shots, the whole forming such a harmony of horror as I trust never to hear again. The sounds died away as I halted to listen, only to be replaced by the thunder of many approaching feet. Trapped on three sides, the mob in the square had taken its only avenue of escape and was even then pouring down the street which lay parallel to the one I was in. I again began to run, reaching the ferry approach in time to mingle with the vanguard of the fleeing mob as it swerved round from the right, evidently making for the same means of safety as myself.

This being a Saturday night, two boats were running. One, already filled with its usual complement of foot-passengers and vehicles, was waiting at the pier with steam up, ready to cast off in time to pass her sister-ship in midstream. As I raced across the gangway I could see the captain on the bridge staring in sur-

prize at the crowd running toward his boat.

“What the blazes is the matter?” he called to me as I passed.

“The slime! Death!” was all I could pant out; for I was almost breathless.

“What?” he yelled back, and repeated his question as the ever-increasing crowd began to throng across the gangways. But the only answer he received must have served only to make his bewilderment greater:

“The slime! the slime! Cast off! Hurry!” they shouted, “The slime!—the slime is coming!”

Now I am very loth to seem to cast an imputation on the conduct of a man who is no longer able to defend himself; yet I can not help thinking that the captain of the ferry fell into a grave error of judgment in not casting off immediately. Even granting that the frenzied cries of the crowd were meaningless to him, their obvious terror—to say nothing of the rifle-fire—should have warned him of the urgent need for haste. In spite of this, it was not until the foremost wave of the pursuing slime had actually reached the pier, and had commenced to pour down the broad gangways on the upper deck which admit the vehicular traffic, that he awoke to a full realization of the peril.

“Cast off all!” he bawled suddenly. “Cast off, I tell you!”

At the same time he jammed the engine-room telegraph over to “Full speed ahead.”

But the men who should have been standing by the hawsers were no longer at their posts. The huge paddle-wheels began to churn the dun-colored waters to a creamy froth; the hawsers strained and groaned; but the heavy, broad-beamed vessel remained immovably fastened to the pier.

The trickling rivulets of slime had become a broad, fast-flowing stream, which, having covered the upper deck,

now dripped and splashed on the deck below. Shrieks began to mingle with the hoarse orders and the grinding of the engines. . . .

At this I hesitated no longer. If I must die, I preferred a cleaner and more merciful fate than that which awaited me on that boat. Not a score of yards away was a string of moored barges. I ran forward to the bow—in order to be as far as possible from the seething maelstrom set up by the revolving paddles—sprang upon the grating, and plunged head foremost into the river.

Striking out with all my might under the surface, I rose well clear of the deadly suction, and in a few minutes had reached the nearest barge and clambered aboard. Then I dashed the water from my eyes and looked back at the ferry-boat.

One of the mooring warps had already been cast off, or severed, for her stern swung well clear of the jetty. Beside the lower gangway, a man—a laborer by his clothes—was sawing at the forward hawser with a jack-knife. The strands began to part even as I looked. Then the weakened rope gave way with a report like a cannon-shot, and the ferry, under the impulse of her powerful paddles, shot out into the river, steering erratically and rending the air with long, frightened blasts from her siren.

The slime had accomplished its work only too well; it was clear that the vessel was completely out of control. Alarmed, and probably not a little puzzled, at the extraordinary evolutions of her consort, the other ferry-boat had approached in order, it seemed, to render assistance, and now lay about a cable's length away, with her paddles slowly flapping to keep her in position against the strongly running tide. Straight toward it the other vessel was driving at full speed! A collision seemed inevitable; yet the steersman must have retained some glimmering of consciousness still. At the last minute the helm was swung

hard over to port and the ship veered round, rushing past the other's stern with only a few feet of clear water showing between. But it must have been the last expiring effort of the man at the wheel. Instead of straightening out on her course again, the boat continued to swerve in response to her ported helm: until, having described a complete circle with undiminished speed, she crashed into the other ship's broadside, just abaft the paddle-box.

The heavy bluff bow seemed to cut through sponson and plating like a knife through cheese. In a few seconds the rammed ship had a list so great that the vehicles on the upper deck came rushing down the incline, to plunge, one after another, through the bulwarks into the water beneath. Presently she turned completely over, wrenching herself free from her destroyer as she did so, and the roar of her exploding boilers preceded the final plunge.

Then the other ship, apparently undamaged and with engines still slowly revolving, described yet another stately circle, until, her progress growing slower and ever slower by reason of the diminishing head of steam in the unstoked boilers, she finally came to rest with her horrible cargo near the wharf belonging to the Beckton Gas Works.

In such tragic fashion was the slime transferred to the north bank of the Thames.

4

I THINK it must have been some purely subconscious instinct that directed my footsteps homeward, for of my movements immediately after the destruction of the ferry I retain only a vague and confused memory. I have a dim recollection of having rowed ashore to some steps near the Dockyard, in a dingey which I found moored to the barge, and I remember seeing the advancing slime not a hundred yards off as I crossed the

Lower Woolwich Road. But what route I pursued between that point and my house at Eltham I have not the faintest idea.

Certain it is that I must have tramped throughout the whole night, for the east was already gray with the dawn when I found myself seated at my upstairs window, gazing dully out at the country around. It was not until the pangs of hunger asserted themselves that I arose to seek food, and a strange assortment it was that I at last collected: half a loaf of stale bread, a tin of pineapple, and a bottle of ale. As I sat down at the table I realized with a start that I had not broken my fast since that hurried meal with Professor Boyd-Phulger, in that same room, twenty-four hours earlier. Twenty-four hours!—I seemed to have lived through an eternity of horror since he had brought the news to me. I wondered what was happening now. Had the progress of the slime been checked, or was it even now pouring through the streets of London?

Moved by a sudden thought, I left my meal half eaten and, crossing to the radio set, connected up the batteries. The first words which issued from the loud-speaker were part of the personal proclamation by King George ordering the immediate and systematic evacuation of the capital.

It would be superfluous for me to give the full text of that amazing speech; sufficient to say that I listened to each word with a sense of incredulous bewilderment. The idea of the largest, wealthiest, and most populous city in the world being abandoned to the very lowest form of organic life seemed utterly fantastic. Yet, even then, I could not but admire the prudence and foresight with which every detail had been thought out and every contingency provided for. Section by section, beginning with those districts nearest the slime, the inhabitants were to lock up and leave their houses and shops. Every motor

vehicle within the Greater London area was to be requisitioned to convey them, street by street, parish by parish, to the various railway termini, where special trains would be waiting ready to leave at once for the great camps and improvised billets which were being prepared in the Midlands and North of England. Squadrons of military airplanes were to be dispatched at once to rescue those unfortunate families who had already been hemmed in by the advancing gray tide. General mobilization was ordered. Heavy artillery, tanks, gas, liquid fire—in short, all the resources of modern warfare—were to be brought into play to destroy the deadly menace. Calmness and orderly conduct were enjoined upon all. Ex-service men were appealed to that they might enrol themselves in the new emergency battalions which were being formed to assist the police and military in their twofold task of destroying the slime and preserving order. All coming forward were to receive rations and infantry pay. Looting would be punished by death.

Three times I heard this epochal speech repeated, each time on a different wave-length. Shortly after the conclusion of the third repetition I heard the well-known voice of Professor Boyd-Phulger issue from the instrument before me.

“Boyd-Phulger calling! Hullo! Hullo everybody—anybody! Professor Boyd-Phulger calling from Shooters Hill!”

It was the merest ghost of a whisper, but it thrilled me like a trumpet-call. My hands were shaking with excitement as I turned the knobs to tune in to the wave-length on which he and I were accustomed to communicate. Little did we dream, when we had fitted up those sets as a mere spare-time hobby, what desperate issues would one day hang upon them!

“Hullo!” I shouted into the microphone when I had made the adjustment. “It is I—Harold—calling.”

Something that sounded like a sigh of relief floated back from the ether. "Thank heaven, I have got you at last! I've been trying to make you hear, off and on, all through the night."

"Where are you speaking from?" I queried.

"The laboratory at my house. The place is surrounded by the slime. I am entirely cut off. My batteries are running down—I can't get London at all, and there's not much time to waste——"

"Yes, yes—go on," I urged in an agony of apprehension as the voice faltered.

"I've barricaded the place and stopped all crevices as well as I was able, but the stuff is finding ways to enter in spite of my efforts. It can only be a question of time now. I know it is impossible for me to escape, but I have been experimenting continuously since I parted from you, and I have made a discovery which will save London yet. You must take my message and try to communicate with headquarters. If you succeed it will mean the entire destruction of the terrible scourge I have brought upon humanity. . . ."

His voice had tailed off weakly and finally ceased altogether. I shouted frantic appeals into the microphone for several minutes before he spoke again:

"I was forced to leave the instrument"—his voice was but a husky whisper—"the slime has found entrance to this room. Ah! . . ."

A deadly fear gripped my heart as the voice again ceased.

"But your discovery?" I cried. "Tell me of the discovery which will destroy the slime."

He could not have understood my question, for he went on aimlessly: "By the sounds which have reached me I surmise that the military have been shelling the stuff with high explosives. Such a proceeding is worse than useless. Without actually killing

the organisms, it will but serve to spread them over a wider area in which to increase and multiply. It is impossible to kill them by ordinary methods; even if you cut them in pieces you but hasten their natural increase by fission. Nothing but the combination of chemicals that I discovered last night will exterminate them utterly."

Ever since the professor had first commenced to speak I had been conscious of an increasing weakness in his voice. Had the slime, I wondered, already begun its deadly work on him? I waited in an agony of impatience. Would he carry to the grave, untold, the secret that would save humanity?

"Tell me the formula of the antidote," I called to him. "Tell me at once—before it is too late."

I waited his answer breathlessly. Twice an indistinct murmur issued from the loud-speaker, as though the man essayed to speak but could not. Then in a gasping, jerky whisper came the words:

"They've got me, Harold! . . . I'm done for! . . . Tell—the authorities—the formula to—destroy the slime—is——"

"Yes?" I prompted.

But the only reply was an unintelligible babble of words and moans; and when these died away there came a noise like that made by a falling body; then a deep silence which no entreaty of mine could break.

5

EXACTLY how long elapsed between the death of the professor and the coming of Mavis I have never been able to determine. The event had plunged me into a stupor almost as complete as that which follows a violent physical blow; so that seconds, minutes and hours might have passed alike unheeded.

So humanity was doomed! Such was the tenor of my vague and confused thoughts. The victorious ame-

bas, invigorated and augmented in numbers by the death of each fresh victim, would sweep unchecked over London, a flood of destruction as remorseless as it was irresistible, as deadly as it was unkillable. And after London—what then? What guarantee was there that the slime would not continue on its way, eating up village after village, town after town, city after city, from one end of the kingdom to the other? And who could say that the mischief would end even then? Only twenty-one miles separate the coasts of England and France; and it seemed as if the amebas were as much at home in water as on land. They might dominate Europe—perhaps the whole world.

There is nothing new or strange in the fact of whole species of highly specialized mammals being entirely wiped off the face of the earth. The study of paleontology brings to light thousands of instances where such forms have, in past ages, become utterly extinct; indeed, so much so that we are only aware that they ever existed by the fossilized bones which have been occasionally dug up. Could it be possible, I mused, that the mighty, ever-changing cycle of nature was at that moment nearing the end of another revolution? Was man—the highest and most advanced type of life upon the earth—about to be in his turn supplanted by another form, and that the very humblest of known organisms—nay, the primitive ooze from which all life had been slowly evolved during those countless ages that stretch between the present day and that far-off, unknown period, when the cooling earth was first rendered habitable to organic life? The very thought was overwhelming. And yet, why should it not be true? Virtually every form of life has had its day and then perished utterly and completely. That was the law of nature. Why should mankind be an exception to the rule?

I was aroused from these pessimistic meditations by the sound of a motor-car drawing up before the front garden gate, followed immediately afterward by a ring at the bell. Throwing open the door, I found myself, to my unbounded amazement, face to face with Mavis.

"You?" I almost shouted. "I thought you safe in Scotland. Why have you ventured here?"

"I read about the slime in the papers, and returned this morning. I tried to get to Shooters Hill, but the roads are impassable. So I made my way here, hoping to find my uncle with you."

It is a strange fact that her presence brought home to me something which I should have realized long before: namely, the great danger I courted in remaining so near the area occupied by the slime.

"How far were you able to get toward Shooters Hill?" I asked quickly.

"Not beyond that bend in the road," she answered, pointing to a curve about three hundred yards distant.

So near? I felt my blood run cold at the imminence of the peril.

"There is no time to lose," I told her. "We must get to London at once. There we can get a train which will carry us far from all danger."

"But—my uncle?" she cried. "Is he not here with you?"

I shook my head and averted my eyes. "He is beyond the reach of the slime." I could not summon up courage to tell her the truth. "Do not worry about him, but come before it is too late."

Fearing further questions, I gently took her hand and led her down the hall toward the front door. Suddenly I stopped dead and a groan of despair broke from my lips.

Stretching between ourselves and the waiting car was a broad stream of heaving gray, which, following the contour of the ground, had already

joined another stream coming from the rear of the house, cutting off our retreat. We were trapped!

It was a mere instinctive action with which I shut and locked the door. It was futile to hope that such a barrier would be effective against that all-pervading, living sea. The instincts of the animalcules would lead them to worm their way through crevices, scale perpendicular surfaces, anything, in fact, to gain access to the food they coveted, which—my blood froze at the thought—in this case meant my own living body and that of the woman I loved!

In a few hurried sentences I explained the peril in which we stood. Her face grew white as death, but there was no tremor in her voice as she asked: "Then it is the end?"

"Yes." I hardly recognized the sound of my own voice.

"There is no hope whatever?" she went on.

I pointed to the film of gray that was beginning to obscure the lower window-panes. "In two hours, at the most, all will be over."

Beyond nodding her head slightly she made no sign that she had heard.

Death. . . . Would it come like the closing of a tiny door, or as the opening of a far greater one? For a long time I strove to keep my mind from contemplation of the manner in which the end would come; yet, in spite of my resolution, my eyes would return to the slight, graceful figure opposite me. The thought of that foul, creeping slime enveloping those fair limbs almost goaded me to frenzy. I leaped to my feet.

"No, by heaven!" I cried aloud. "Any way but that!"

Even as I said the words I was conscious of a sagging weight at my hip. It was the revolver. Half mechanically I drew it out, and our eyes met above the glittering barrel. There was no need for words on my part.

"Yes," she said slowly, answering the question in my eyes. "Kiss me. Then shoot me dead."

And as she spoke a slender stream of gray entered beneath the door.

I raised the weapon until it touched the sunny curls, and then closed my eyes. With an unspoken prayer for forgiveness in my heart, I pulled the trigger.

I dared not look upon my handiwork. My eyes were still closed tightly as I raised the weapon to my own temple.

Simultaneously with the crash of the explosion came blessed oblivion. . . .

"FEELING better?" asked a voice near me.

I slowly opened my eyes. Above me, looking blurred and indistinct, hovered the face of Professor Boyd-Phulger. For a while I gazed stupidly; then recollection rushed upon me. I staggered unsteadily to my feet as the explanation of his presence dawned slowly on my mind.

"Of course—you, too, are dead."

"Dead?" he repeated, blinking behind his glasses. Then he stepped forward and forced me back into the chair. The grip of his hand on my shoulder seemed a trifle too heavy for that of a disembodied spirit.

"Where am I?" I asked faintly.

"In my laboratory. I was just about to ascertain the extent to which the amebas were susceptible to anesthesia when you happened to catch a whiff of the nitrous oxide. It sent you off to bye-bye as peacefully as an infant in its mother's arms."

I placed my hand to my throbbing head. Was it possible that my horrible experience was but a drugged nightmare?

"Tell me," I said suddenly, "how long have I been unconscious?"

Professor Boyd-Phulger glanced at his watch.

"Exactly eight minutes," he said.