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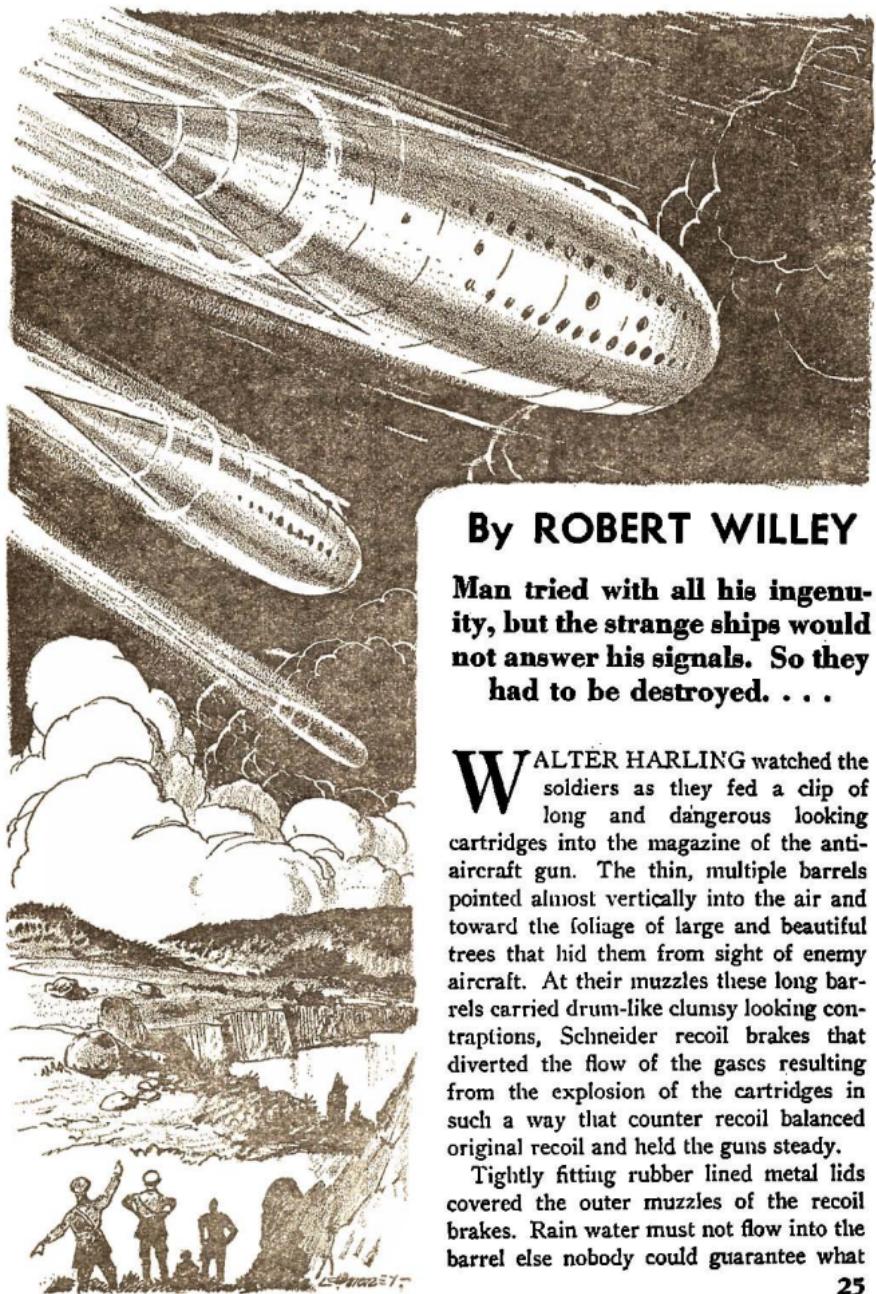
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THE INVASION



By ROBERT WILLEY

Man tried with all his ingenuity, but the strange ships would not answer his signals. So they had to be destroyed. . . .

WALTER HARLING watched the soldiers as they fed a clip of long and dangerous looking cartridges into the magazine of the anti-aircraft gun. The thin, multiple barrels pointed almost vertically into the air and toward the foliage of large and beautiful trees that hid them from sight of enemy aircraft. At their muzzles these long barrels carried drum-like clumsy looking contraptions, Schneider recoil brakes that diverted the flow of the gases resulting from the explosion of the cartridges in such a way that counter recoil balanced original recoil and held the guns steady.

Tightly fitting rubber lined metal lids covered the outer muzzles of the recoil brakes. Rain water must not flow into the barrel else nobody could guarantee what

would happen if the guns were to be used suddenly. It was raining hard, as it had rained for many hours. And although it was not even late in the afternoon it was almost completely dark. One could just distinguish the nearest trees and the guns in the damp dark air.

The battery was in position not far from the road. On the other side of it, on a clearing that had been a famous camping ground in this forest—one of the nation's most beautiful National Forests—stood a battery of eight inch howitzers. They were firing rhythmically. Walter Harling had watched them for quite some time only an hour ago. Every fourteen minutes the heavy barrel of one of the guns would jerk back under the vicious recoil of the exploding charge. The other three guns would follow suit, each one firing exactly twelve seconds after the preceding shot had been fired. Then there would be quiet again for fourteen minutes. The elevation of the thick barrels showed that the howitzers were shooting at extreme range.

Walter Harling would not have noticed it without being told that all this looked like real war only to civilian eyes; indeed he did not believe it at first when he was told. But then he began to see it, too. The howitzers fired without flash destroyer . . . and the soldiers did not behave as they would have done if counter shelling would have been expected. The soldiers were sweating, working hard, pounding away at a distant target with the greatest fire rapidity of which their guns were capable. But they did not have to listen for the sound of approaching enemy shells. They never got a "strafing" without due warning.

THREE was incessant rumble of artillery fire through the famous forest that was now dripping with rain. Many other batteries of heavy howitzers were shooting too, all firing beautifully syn-

chronized so that there was never a longer interval than fifteen seconds without at least one shell in the air. It sounded almost like the thundering noise of some gigantic machinery, running noisily but steadily.

Suddenly shouts came through the rain, cutting through the artillery noise that almost seemed part of the rainy forest in its monotony.

"Anti-aircraft units, attention! Enemy ship approaching!"

The crews of the anti-aircraft at once wakened to more intensive life. They grouped around their guns, ready for immediate action, tense with expectation of orders and, possibly, of death.

There were no orders for many minutes. But through the sudden silence that seemingly followed the commotion—the howitzers kept shooting clockwork fashion—Harling heard the deep thunder of much heavier guns. He knew there were several twenty-four-inch railroad guns stationed on the only railroad track that passed near the edge of the National Forest.

The heavy, long-range pieces were joining the fire of the howitzers.

The battery commander of the anti-aircraft guns, sitting with the earphones of a special detector on his head amidst piles of cartridges, suddenly yelled a series of numbers. Harling understood the meaning of none of them.

"Utmost fire rapidity. Fire!"

The next few minutes were filled by a holocaust of sound. Four anti-aircraft guns began pumping their shells into the air, forty rounds per minute each. Other batteries did the same. . . . The forest seemed to be full of hidden anti-aircraft units. Harling looked upwards against the rain but it was impossible to see anything except occasional flashes of exploding shells. If the enemy ship passed overhead—as the colonel's detector indicated—it was not visible in the rain clouds.

Suddenly the scene was illuminated by a bright flash, as if at least ten tons of magnesium powder had exploded. Immediately afterward a ruddy glow began to show to the left. Trees were burning. But the glow soon died down. The rain was more effective than the chemical extinguishers that were probably used by the soldiers close to the spot where the bolt had struck. The "enemy" had answered the fire.

An orderly approached Harling.

He saluted, rain dripping from every seam of his uniform.

"The tanks will be on the road in half an hour, sir," he reported. "No car can get through," he added when Harling looked surprised. "After they have finished unloading ammunition you will kindly go back with them. The general is expecting you."

"I'll come," said Harling. He said it rather absent mindedly because his brain was busy with very important thoughts. And soon after the orderly had left he began walking over the rain soaked ground of the forest toward the rutted dirt road.

THE strange war had started only a few months ago, when Earth had been peaceful and humanity too proud of its achievements for a while to think of destruction. And humanity had even believed at the very beginning of this war that it would be the beginning of a new period, more important than the discovery of the Americas a few centuries back.

But it had really started still further back, although not much more than about a decade. There had been a mighty river winding its way through a long chain of valleys, surrounded by gently sloped mountains. Cedars and pines and a dozen other varieties of trees grew there in abundance. It was a large beautiful forest, so beautiful in fact that the government had deemed it wise to make a Na-

tional Forest out of its most impressive part.

Visitors from all over the country and from quite a number of foreign countries had come to see it. And geologists in summer vacation had worked out its geology, the formations of the valleys and of the river being so interesting to them that the work was really a pleasant hobby. One of the largest valleys had once been an immense lake. Thousands of years ago the river that fed the lake had managed to gnaw a way through a weak spot somewhere in the surrounding mountains and the lake had emptied first into the next valley and finally across a stretch of desert land into the ocean.

At the spot where the original lake had broken through there was still a large waterfall, not very high but carrying a tremendous volume of water. Engineers had looked at this waterfall occasionally, trying to see whether it might be utilized as a source of electric energy. They had always decided to leave it undisturbed. The difference in level was not very impressive and there was as yet not much need for electric power in that part of the country.

Then large quantities of bauxite were found only two dozen miles from the waterfall. Thus there arose a need for electric power and finally the government had decided to harness the water power of the river. The reports of the geologists had enabled the technicians to figure out what should be done. The ancient pass, once destroyed by the flow of water from the original lake should be restored, the lake re-created. Then there would be enough electric power for the aluminum industry and still enough water left to irrigate the rather dry areas near the bauxite mines by means of a canal that could at the same time be used to ship ore and aluminum to more densely populated areas of the country.

It was not even very difficult to do all

this with the new methods of building developed in similar tasks. While investigations were made the project grew. And when the dam was finally built it was the last word in dam engineering, revolutionary in construction. As the water in the valley rose sections could be added to the dam, held in place by the pressure of the water they confined. Walter Harling, in whose energy and inventive talent the government had trusted when he had competed with many others for the construction of the dam was the soul and the brain of the work. And together with the dam rose his fame. In the end the Bureau of Reclamation could proudly state through its public relations office that there was no bigger artificial lake on Earth, and none that was as beautiful and as beneficial as this one. Needless to say that there was also no more modern power plant on Earth and none that had its capacity.

Nothing ever went wrong with this power plant. No matter how the demands of the aluminum works grew, it quietly and efficiently supplied the millions of kilowatt hours needed. In the office of the Treasury nothing but unspoiled pleasure prevailed whenever Harling Dam was mentioned. It was one of the rare things that were perfect even in the eyes of the accounting department. The worst that happened in three and a half years of successful operation was that somebody managed to steal ninety thousand kilowatt hours before he was caught.

TROUBLE came suddenly and completely one night in spring when the engineers that were sitting quietly and contentedly watching rows of gauges had the feeling of satisfaction that results from an ideal job in ideal surroundings. They felt—and would have said so if they had been asked—that they were living on a perfect planet just at the right time.

Suddenly the needles of the gauges be-

haved insanely. Those that ought remain at zero showed unbelievable overloads. Others dropped to zero and behaved as if they were desperately trying to indicate negative values. Dozens of warning lights blinked crazily. Almost every warning bell began to ring . . . but not even the noise they made was quite normal, they were ringing sputteringly, in an odd staccato rhythm electric bells are normally not able to produce. The radio that had given forth soft music began to emit sounds that might be a bad imitation of the noise of an artillery barrage.

Telephones were ringing—the same staccato peals, as those of the warning bells—and when the men took the receivers and listened they heard the same thundering noise that came out of the radio's loudspeaker.

As suddenly as it had come it all stopped. The needles of the gauges returned to their normal positions—still quivering a little as if with excitement—the warning bells and the telephones were silent, the warning lights disappeared and the radio resumed the first movement of the Moonlight Sonata. The engineers looked at each other, nobody said a word because everybody wanted to offer a theory in explanation and nobody could think of one.

Before they had even found time to utter preliminary remarks the disturbance repeated itself in every detail. But this time the men saw something that they believed to be the cause of these strange happenings. Three dirigibles were cruising at low speed over the forests, headed for the dam and the power house. Then the men saw that they were not dirigibles, but not airplanes either. It was easy to see in the bright light of the full moon that they were entirely different. They looked somewhat like the fuselage of a large airplane.

Their general shape was that of elongated teardrops with circular cross sec-

tion throughout, tapering to a needle sharp point. But although the men could see the metal plates that formed the hulls of the ships—they were somewhat scarred and damaged, and although they could count the rows of elliptical portholes, they saw nothing that might support or propel the three ships of the sky. There were no motors, no propellers, not even wings or tail surfaces. Just unsupported beautiful looking hulls, as large as small ocean liners. Occasionally something that looked like luminous spirals appeared near the tail, but it came and went so quickly that the men could not be certain about their observations.

The three ships settled to the ground only about a thousand feet from the power house, coming down as slowly and as gently as airships although they certainly had no gas bags to make them buoyant in air. Most of the men were at the windows now, watching them. They could not see any national insignia, but they assumed these ships to belong to the army of their own nation since there was no reason for an invasion by an enemy. Besides such invasion would certainly have looked different. Those of the men that had stayed at the gauge panels saw to their utmost surprise that the power output of their power plant began to drop steadily. In less than 30 seconds it had reached zero. A few fuses blew out, for no apparent reason. But the gauges also showed that the turbines and dynamos were still running full speed! It was as if somebody stole all this power before it reached the transmission cables.

PHILLIPS, the chief engineer of the power house, who happened to be on night shift decided to have a closer look at the three ships. He and a number of the others went to the flat roof. The ships were still on the ground when the men arrived on the roof but it seemed that they had drawn closer in the mean-

time. They were now hardly more than 500 feet from the power house. And then another incredible thing happened, the three ships began to disappear in the ground. It was not a very soft ground, it could even bear the weight of a car, but it was by no means rocks. And the three ships began to sink down in it as if they were solid and made of lead. When the upper part of their hulls was about even with the surrounding surface they stopped sinking.

Then one of the men made a mistake. There were clouds coming up, obscuring the bright disk of the moon. It became hard to see the incredible ships that had many portholes, not one of them illuminated.

"The searchlights," the man said.

Phillips, the chief engineer, trained the searchlight upon the ships himself. Then somebody closed a switch and the beam of the searchlight illuminated one of the ships brightly. Something like a bright flash answered. It struck first one of the steel masts supporting the heavy high tension cables. The mast broke into splinters like a scratched Prince Ruperts Drop. Then the beam struck the power house. And a tenth of a second later every bug and moth sitting on the stones of the walls, every bird and lizard living in the vines that clung to the walls and, of course, every human being inside the house and on the roof were dead.

THE next day airplanes came to investigate. The failing of the power had made itself noticeable for hundreds of miles. The fact that no telephone call came from the power plant and that no call could get through was noticed much farther. Therefore airplanes had been dispatched as swiftest means of investigation. People imagined Harling Dam broken and every soul in the valley drowned. But the pilots of the airplanes that circled over the valleys saw the dam intact and

in place. However, they saw a few other things that were unusual. One of the masts was missing, the power cables it had supported were cut and led to three strange things like metal dirigibles, each three quarters buried in the ground.

These planes did not come back and when they failed to answer radio calls other planes were dispatched. One of them returned, reporting that the other had suddenly broken to pieces in midair when bright flashes from the ground caught them both.

This report stopped further private flying to Harling Dam. The Army took charge of the situation. And three days later quite a bit of information had been gathered . . . while a number of batteries of heavy artillery had arrived in the forest without anybody knowing it.

There were heated discussions at the high commands office.

The facts were clear. But they could not be explained.

Three airships of unknown construction had occupied the nation's largest power plant. They left it running, using the current generated for their own unknown purposes. Airplanes that tried to attack them were doomed, the invaders had an unknown but deadly accurate weapon. But it did not affect all types of planes alike, some had escaped. They were not undamaged but had managed to glide away from the danger zone.

It was found that their motors and some other implements had disappeared, save for a few handfuls of bits of metal found in the casing. Somebody discovered accidentally that these bits were highly magnetized. Somebody else realized that the planes that escaped were those built of other metals than steel. The conclusion was obvious, that the white beam from the three ships destroyed iron and steel. Possibly by setting up such magnetic strains and stresses that the material broke to pieces—although the theory of ferromag-

netism could not explain such a procedure—possibly by entirely unknown means that brought magnetization only as a by-product.

The ground investigation units dispatched by the army reported other strange facts. There seemed to be a zone where life could not exist. This zone was roughly circular—as far as could be found—with the ships as the center of the circle. The zone extended just beyond Harling Dam. Whoever crossed the invisible border line of the zone just dropped dead, nobody could tell why. The soldiers had marked the danger line as well as they could.

Another crew had tried to establish communication by heliograph with the three ships, because they did not answer radio calls. They had answered the call with a bright flash that wiped out crew, heliograph and car alike. Obviously bright light was disliked by the occupants of the three ships, or else they confused it with their own destructive beam.

Occasionally one of the three ships rose from its pit and cruised to some other part of the world. They were seen—and if not seen detected by the very typical "staccato static" radios emitted when one of the ships was near—almost everywhere. One day Hongkong reported them, the next day London and Berlin almost simultaneously. Then Buenos Aires and New York with only two and a half hours difference. Nothing ever happened, when airplanes went up to approach them they withdrew to high altitudes where the planes could not follow. Occasionally they flashed what was taken as a mysterious signal, a bright ball of light, that was at first deep violet, changed slowly to blue and more rapidly through all the other colors of the rainbow to red.

IT WAS the astronomer Professor Hasgrave who was the first to say publicly what many had been suspecting for

many days that these three ships were arrivals from another planet, possibly even another solar system.

The military authorities that were in charge of the case laughed about Hasgrave at first. But they had to admit that none of their scientists could really explain the feats accomplished by the strangers, to say nothing of duplicating them. They also had to admit that their secret service had not been able to find even the slightest clue that ships of this type had been built in any other country. They began to admit the possibility of extraterrestrial origin of the strange ships when Hasgrave suddenly found a convincing explanation for the bright ball of light released over several cities.

It was not a weapon, he explained, but a warning. It was the adaptation of an astronomical principle for communication. The ball displayed the Doppler effect, it shifted from blue through all colors to red. In astronomy this indicated the recession of a body. Since the sphere of light had remained motionless it obviously meant that the airplanes should go. The speed with which the colors changed increased during the display, meaning that they should go with increasing speed.

A few days of mental effort made the authorities realize that the three ships were actually visitors from the void. To be exact, they were not really visitors. They had just come and established them-

selves. They were uncommunicative, in fact warning humans to stay away. They did no harm, if not approached. And they did not take anything away except the current produced in the power plants of Harling Dam. They behaved actually as a human being might behave at a bee hive. Doing no intentional harm, just taking honey away and crushing those bees that disturbed them. But the bees had stings to defend themselves and to avenge the loss of those killed. Humanity had stings too, airplanes and tanks and guns.

Soon men craved for war with the aliens. They had not come as friends, therefore they must be enemies. That they were simply indifferent hurt mankind's pride, they should at least make an attempt to apologize for the loss of life they had caused. Intelligent beings that were able to do all this what they actually did would certainly also be able to communicate if they wanted to. At any event they had opened hostilities and had to be shown that humanity was not afraid to fight.

The general in command of the armed forces finally felt convinced that he should order an artillery attack. There were many heavy batteries massed now in the forest.

The general gave the order.

Six eight-inch shells dropped in a steep trajectory on the three ships.

The battery commanders had had weeks of time to work out all the factors determining the trajectories. Five of the six shells made clean hits . . . but they exploded fifty meters above the targets. The sixth shell strayed a bit from its trajectory, it landed a few meters from the power house, digging a large crater and damaging the building slightly.

Twenty-four hours later the general received a report that a dome of silvery metal had been erected overnight. It covered the power house and a trial shot with a single heavy shell proved that this dome was as impervious to shell fire as the ships themselves. Then the strange war had begun in earnest. But it was one sided for most of the time and absolutely ineffective. The gunners, although they kept up continuous bombardment did not succeed in catching a ship off guard. The strange power that made shells explode at a safe distance did not fail for a moment. The men grew desperate, especially since the ships occasionally retaliated, always taking a heavy toll of lives and of equipment.

Finally Professor Hasgrave conceived a plan. It was his firm conviction that all these strange manifestations of power were basically electric phenomena. There should be a way of dealing with them. The first man Hasgrave informed was Walter Harling, the man who had created Harling Dam that had become the center of all these strange happenings. They then talked to the general, finally to the president. In the end they agreed to try Hasgrave's plan. And Walter Harling at last won the bitter argument that arose . . . he carried it out himself.

THE tank, splashing through rain and mud brought Harling to a simple but fairly large building, the home of the rangers of the forest, now serving as headquarters for the military command. The general was waiting for them.

They were standing in the doorway, looking out on the dark and rainy landscape. None of them spoke, each knew what the other was thinking.

"The equipment is ready," said the general finally.

"So am I," answered Harling.

They shook hands.

"Red rockets," said Harling.

"Red rockets," repeated the general. "Good luck, Harling!"

Officers led Harling along a wet concrete road which ended at the shore of Harling Lake. There was a boat waiting on the water. And a squadron of hydroplanes. Harling heard them take off ten minutes after the motor launch had pulled his rowboat from the shore. When the planes were in the air the rumble of artillery fire died gradually down.

Harling knew what was going on in the forest.

Guns were inspected and made ready to fire at a given signal. Ammunition was piled up close to the guns, ready for immediate use. Automatic gyro-controlled devices aligned the barrels of whole batteries on the targets. The gigantic railroad guns, not able to fire quickly, pointed their barrels in such a way that their super heavy shells would land exactly in the right spot at the right moment. Expertly trained officers worked with slide rules to find the right amount of powder needed for a given trajectory at a certain air pressure, density and temperature.

"Half a mile from the danger zone," said the officer in the motor launch.

"Cut cables!"

"Good luck!"

Harling waited till the motor vessel had disappeared in the rain. Then he inspected his boat. It was built without the tiniest bit of iron. From the sides of the wooden vessel aluminum struts projected upwards, supporting a net of gleaming copper wire. It covered the boat entirely, just high enough for Harling to stand up-



right in it. On all sides the copper net trailed in the water, leaving enough room to handle the oars.

Something like a wide cape of copper wire mesh was ready for Harling. It was supported over his head by struts fastened to a wide aluminum collar. The "cape" was long enough to touch the ground all around his feet in any position Harling might assume—like the net protecting the boat it should be heavy enough to ground even powerful electric bolts. Harling donned the strange garment and rowed toward the valve controls of his dam. Meanwhile the airplanes—all aluminum construction, even the motors that naturally did not last very long—danced like fireflies over the three ships and the metal dome that covered the power house.

The planes tried to center the enemy's attention upon themselves.

If he was attentive to their puny actions at all. . . .

WHEN Harling passed the invisible barrier he felt a prickling sensation on his skin. It actually was an electric field of great power, generated and kept up in a manner unknown to terrestrial science. Suddenly the dam appeared out of the darkness, looking like a massive seven foot wall from the lake. Harling followed its curve with his boat. He knew every inch of this dam—but he had no time for sentimental recollections. He prayed that the valve controls were in working order. They were hydraulic and would not be impaired by the electric field.

But the "enemy" might have destroyed them, nobody had ever been able to approach and investigate.

Harling found one of the metal stairways that led from the crown of the dam to the bottom of the lake. He tied the boat to it, made certain that the several dozen of red starlight rockets set up in the copper net were still in proper position. He took the main fuse—electric ignition was, of course, impossible—which was inserted into a watertight rubber hose. There were matches in a watertight case tied to the end of the hose. Harling took the end of the main fuse with him. Then he lifted the net of the boat and stepped on the metal staircase, always careful to have his wire mesh armor trailing in the water. He waited for electrical effects, there were none.

Fortunately there was a catwalk running along the inner side of the dam, now submerged under about four feet of water. Harling decided that the submerged catwalk was still better a way than the crown of the dam. He might be seen up there, even if he crawled and in spite of the darkness. Hasgrave had a theory that "those others" might be able to "see" the heat his body radiated.

He held match case and rubber hose in his left hand, heavy service pistol in the other, nobody could know what he might encounter in the valve house. The door was not closed when he arrived there at last. The body of a dead man blocked his way, the guard that had been on duty when the invaders came. There was no living being in the four rooms. He looked over the controls, nobody had touched them for weeks and they seemed to be in working order. He tried one of the smallest valves experimentally . . . it did work. He could go through with the original plan.

He opened the match case. The matches were dry.

Then he turned the wheels that opened

the upper gates of both spillways. But he did not open the lower locks that made the water coming through the spillways pour into the canal. The water would fill both of the gigantic spillways and would stop at the lower lock. If this lock would give the water would not enter the canal that was closer by a second lock but would flood the valley itself. Therefore the mechanisms were set once and for all in such a way that the lower locks could not be operated independently. They could only be opened and closed together. Harling left them all closed as they were according to the instruments on the panel.

He waited for three minutes, knowing that everything depended on these three times sixty seconds. A hundred times he thought during the next hundred and fifty seconds that his watch had stopped. A hundred times he made sure that it had not.

Everywhere in the forest the officers of the gun crews were waiting too, eyes glued to the dials of the watches, hands ready to pull the lanyards of their pieces. Crack pilots, while doing crazy stunts with their hydroplanes above the quietly resting three alien ships glanced at the crown of the dam.

Two minutes and forty seconds.

Countless tons of water were falling down the steep grading of the tubular spillways.

Two minutes and forty-five seconds.

More and more water going into the spillways. The level of the lake actually receding by inches, unobservable due to the beating rain.

Two minutes and fifty seconds.

The water must reach the lower locks in twenty seconds. Three seconds . . . one had to allow for the fuse to burn, one or two for the rockets, four more for . . .

Two minutes and fifty-five seconds.

Harling lighted six or seven matches in a bundle, held the rubber hose clenched.

Three minutes!

NOW two more seconds to wait. Harling counted them with a strained voice counting not "one, two" but higher figures that would take a second to pronounce.

"A hundred and one" . . . "A hundred and two" . . .

He lighted the fuse, let it fall to the floor and threw himself down.

Three seconds later five dozens of army rockets rose into the sky, though wet most of them worked. They fought their way through the rain. . . . Harling thought that the resistance of the rain was very fortunate, else they might explode in the deep hanging clouds and go unnoticed.

The sky suddenly shone red with Very Lights.

Like a mighty thunderclap four score guns answered, barrels jerking back under the recoil, reports deafening crews, shells screaming through the rain.

The shells of the howitzers arrived first, exploding over their usual targets, ships and dome. A second later the twenty-four inch projectiles of the railroad guns came. They were aimed with deadly accuracy. Two on each side of the valley arrived side by side. . . .

And broke the lower locks!

A flood of water spouted out of the spillways, spread over the valley because the seconds locks, those closing the canal, still blocked the way. The same instant

the shells of two combined batteries of seventeen inch mobile mortars crashed into the dam—where sections joined that were not so stable now under lessening water pressure. Harling Dam broke, thundered down into the valley.

It poured over the dome and the ships. And together with the water came all the shells the already steaming barrels of dozens of batteries of heavy howitzers had held in reserve.

And Professor Hasgrave proved to be right again. The repellent shield on which shells and bombs had exploded was gone, somehow the water made its power fail. The avalanche of heavy shells exploded on the hulls and inside of their targets. The targets ceased to exist. . . .

The general himself was present in the rescue party that climbed up to the valve tower in search for Harling. They did not have a very clear conception what they had expected to see . . . at any event it was not what they really saw.

Harling was sitting with only very little clothing—the other hung over the rail to dry—in the rays of the early morning sun at the only table in the control room. He was furiously writing equations on the back of beer advertising posters. And instead of listening to congratulations he informed the rescue party that Harling Dam could be ready to resume work before Spring.

THE END