

# Weird Tales

REGISTERED IN U.S. PATENT OFFICE

A MAGAZINE of the



BIZARRE and UNUSUAL

VOLUME XV

NUMBER 6

Published monthly by the Popular Fiction Publishing Company, 2457 E. Washington Street, Indianapolis, Ind. Entered as second-class matter March 20, 1923, at the post office at Indianapolis, Ind., under the act of March 3, 1879. Single copies, 25 cents. Subscription, \$2.50 a year in the United States, \$3.00 a year in Canada. English office: Charles Lavell, 13, Serjeant's Inn, Fleet Street, E. C. 4, London. The publishers are not responsible for the loss of unsolicited manuscripts, although every care will be taken of such material while in their possession. The contents of this magazine are fully protected by copyright and must not be reproduced either wholly or in part without permission from the publishers.

NOTE—All manuscripts and communications should be addressed to the publishers' Chicago office at 840 North Michigan Avenue, Chicago, Ill.

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# The PLANET of HORROR

by  
WILFORD  
ALLEN



"Then I will fight and play and fly with the shapes that course out there where the sun is no more than a star."

**A**MONG the world's mysteries of supernatural terror there are a few which modern science will not laugh to scorn. But there is one of which it will not even speak, let alone admit publicly that there is any basis for the tale. And as for smiling at its mention—try it out some time on one of the few scientists who know! Lycanthropy, vampirism, demonology, all such terrors of the ancient world, have long been outlawed, set down as

products of the over-terrorized imagination of our ignorant forebears, the nightmares of the early race.

But in the case of the most horrible mystery of all, if you could back one of the informed scientists into a metaphorical corner and, pledging secrecy, get at what science actually knows of what occurred, you would be astonished, and more—much more. I learned by accident, and ever since I have been oppressed by strange sensations of horror. And I never knew all the truth. No man ever did and lived on, a human being capable of telling it.

At the most, science knows but little of the Thing. To begin with, it knew, as the world at large knows, that since interplanetary navigation has become a routine matter, ships have disappeared occasionally, just as in preceding eras airplanes and ocean liners dropped from sight without apparent reason, leaving no word of the fate which struck them down, although equipped with the most dependable means of communication. A ship went out and never returned. Nothing further was ever heard of it, no one had news of it after a certain moment, when everything was well and there was apparently no reason to suspect an impending tragedy. The ships simply vanished.

Naturally the laboratory staff of the Interplanet was interested, doing its best to fathom the mystery, but getting nowhere. And then Hobart Smallin, staff computer of the great concern, made his extraordinary announcement. There was disbelief from all quarters, but not for long. Proof came with dramatic suddenness.

Smallin sat quietly at his desk while the Interplanet heads filed in one by one. He seemed to have collapsed into himself, his chin sunken down to the support of his chest, his eyes staring into the chart before him as if already he felt the encroaching influence of the Thing. He said nothing, until MacAndrews, the Interplanet president himself, entered solemnly. He said little then, except, at a nod from MacAndrews, to indicate that the others should approach and look upon the chart which he had prepared.

"What do you see there, gentlemen?" his voice sounded harshly.

Arthur, transport manager, raised his eyes in surprise.

"Why—just the orbit of one of the planets."

"Take another look," Smallin murmured grimly. "Which planet?"

"It—it's between Saturn and Uranus," Arthur stammered as his

eyes returned to take in the details. "There isn't any planet there."

"You are right," Smallin agreed. "Those dots represent, not the positions of any known planet, but of the Interplanet ships which have vanished, as of the last moment that their whereabouts was known to us. But here is the problem, gentlemen." His voice fell to a dusky whisper. "As Arthur noticed, when plotted they are grouped along a curve which resembles that of a planet. The resemblance goes farther. If we group the positions in two parts, compute normal place, from each group, and compute the resulting orbits, the two come out identical—which is overwhelming proof that the entire list of missing transports vanished by coming under the influence of something which has a planetary motion about the sun."

"But there is no planet there," Arthur objected. "Even so small a planet as one ten miles in diameter would have been picked up before now. And the chance of thirty-three ships colliding with an object less than ten miles in diameter is ridiculously small. One might, although the chance would be remote. Two might by a most unusual freak of the probabilities. But more than two—the chances against it would be a trillion to one. And thirty-three! That is my idea of a perfect impossibility, if there is such a thing."

"But the ships did vanish," MacAndrews broke in. "And they vanished in the positions which are indicated on that chart."

"It's clear enough," Branton, of the detectives, had reached his conclusion. "It's banditry. Some gang of outlaws are operating from a base on one of the Saturnian moons."

"I thought of that at first," Smallin nodded gloomily. "But—in that case the progress of the spot of attack through space should keep pace with that of Saturn. The chances against it's assuming the exact progression of a planet acting under the laws of grav-

ity at the appropriate distance is so small as to be nil."

"Maybe," Branton grunted indifferently. "I don't know about the mathematics. But if it is so improbable, what's to prevent the fellows from knowing as much as you do about its improbability, from plotting what would be the orbit of a planet revolving about the sun at the chosen distance, and staging their attacks along the computed orbit for the purpose of puzzling us?"

"That is possible," Smallin admitted. "But—I don't think that represents the facts."

"Then what are the facts?" Branton sneered.

"I—I'm not ready to say yet. They would be unbelievable. I want to hear the opinions of some of the others first."

"No use wasting time," Branton announced. "The thing is plain enough. I'm off for the defense department at Washington. God!" His enthusiasm rose. "This will be the biggest thing ever. The President will give me a whole fleet to go after the bandits with!"

"Wait!" MacAndrews commanded. "We have one more proof, if any is needed. When I got Smallin's note I could not believe, and yet there was a transport, No. 28, approaching the danger zone at that moment. I did not know its exact position, but was aware that it was close enough to be in danger. I had a message sent to direct it to change course and circle the spot where the chart indicates the danger lies at this moment. The message, gentlemen, was not acknowledged! That was why I was late. For I hurried then to the chartroom. The pathway of 28 had reached the spot a half-hour before my message had been sent! No. 28 is lost! And, when computations can predict ahead of time, we have no choice but to believe that they are entirely reliable. Now, with Dr. Smallin, I want the

opinions of all of you, and we will thresh this out now."

The opinions of all coincided with that already expressed by Branton, and the decision was reached that an expedition must be sent out to clear the region of the band of outlaws who were presumably operating. Only Smallin held out against the others, and as he admitted that he had no material proof to back his weird belief, it was disregarded.

"Go home and rest, Smallin," MacAndrews laid his hand soothingly on the bowed shoulders of the computer. "You have been working too hard. This has been a strain, and your brain needs a rest. We can't afford to have you crack that head of yours, Smallin."

THE men trooped out, Brandon to hop triumphantly to Washington, the others to return to their various posts. Number 28 was lost! There were now thirty-four missing ships. Smallin sat alone, staring into the chart again.

Acting vigorously but secretly, the government equipped a fleet with the latest devices of offense, the newly perfected annihilating ray foremost among them.

For three weeks the punitive expedition drove uneventfully on, reporting its progress every hour in a routine manner. Then it began to draw near the zone of danger. On the day when it was due to arrive, the officials of the Interplanet, together with the Secretary of Defense, were closeted in the spacious office of the latter at the capital. The fleet was sending bulletins at five-minute intervals, and all were watching them eagerly as they were flashed onto the screen. Then came one, unbelievable in its import.

"Number 87, on scouting duty, has vanished. No sound or sign to indicate conflict. The ship simply faded into nothingness!"

Then in rapid staccato, "Power

shut off—brakes working! The next ship has vanished! Numbers 45 and 127, following in parallel, also gone! No sign of struggle! Brakes on full power, but we are still drifting up against the spot where they disappeared. We are——” The message was interrupted abruptly.

A moment later the story was taken up by one of the rear-guard, which had managed to swerve off in time to avoid the fate of the leaders.

“All but three ships lost. Leader lost. Awaiting instructions. For your information there was no sign of enemy. Ahead is uninterrupted view of sky, yet other ships have vanished as if they plunged into and through an opaque screen. How can there be an opaque screen if the stars beyond show through so clear? There is something wrong out here. It is something—terrible. A peculiar feeling—psychic distress, horror—noted by all. We await instructions.”

The secretary looked about the table at the horror-stricken faces. Mac-Andrews nodded at the unspoken question. The cabinet officer turned to a messenger who was staring goggle-eyed.

“Message! Return at once. Signed Burleigh.”

Then he turned to the others again, terror showing through his wide-breached eyes.

“Gentlemen, we have met defeat. By what?” he mouthed the awful question which was burning in the brains of all.

But the story was not yet told. Before the instructions could get on their way another message came, and the men leaped to their feet in uncontrollable horror at its import.

“Something—terrible—happening,” the words came as though stuttering. Then they burst into frantic speed. “We can no longer control our movements. I have just managed to tear the Thing loose for a second, but I know it will clutch my brain again with its frozen fingers!

It has already caught the others, and they are driving the ships straight toward the hell where the first ships vanished. I know it now! It’s hell! And the cold devil of hell is after me again. He’s clawing at the base of my brain! Clawing! Clawing with talons of nothing and ice! Freez——” The message of terror came to a sudden end.

There was nothing but silence in the big room. Eyes told what words could not formulate. And there was Hobart Smallin, still seated, staring as though his eyes were focused on that far point in space where a nothingness that froze and tore at the brains of humans drew them to itself in a hell of nothingness and horror.

**I**T WAS difficult to hush the thing up, for even soldiers have relatives, and the vanished men were the cause of many inquiries. But it had to be done, and it was done in the way governments have done the same before.

One thing had been demonstrated. Whatever it was, the destroyer had not operated in the expected manner. Only Smallin seems to have had any idea of the form the Thing would take in striking, and so incredible was it that he had not dared to utter his thoughts until the awful happening itself had lent them authority. He knew well that the mere mention of them without that fearful backing would have put him in an asylum as hopelessly insane.

The enemy had not operated as a bandit group would have done. If it had possessed the secret of the annihilating ray there would have been flashes to mark the end of each ship as the destroying beam played on it. But there had been no suggestion of such, no sign of danger until the incredible had taken place. Each ship had simply vanished, swallowed up. Swallowed by what? The only clue to that was in the despairing message from the last three ships, which had

halted and come under the mysterious influence gradually. It was no clue, for it only told of horror, of nothingness that took the form of devilish cold, of fingers that, freezing, imbedded themselves in the brain, while having no material form. Such clues were useless to men who were sane.

Hobart Smallin was like a man who was dying and yet could not die. He went on, a shrunken wreck, but driving relentlessly, sparing neither himself nor the workmen on a car which he had persuaded MacAndrews to authorize. Its mechanism was sealed in such a way that once started it was beyond the control of the operator. No matter what insane notion he might take to stop or turn, he would be powerless to change its course. A control was devised which would, after steering the ship out to a designated spot, turn and bring it back to earth again, if the ship itself survived intact. In that ship the computer purposed to explore the region of death and bring back information of some kind, if it were mechanically possible to do so.

Then, one night, he sealed himself in the car and was gone. MacAndrews had pleaded with him, but without effect.

"Look at me," Smallin had demanded. "My physician gives me just six months to live. Do you think I can last that long?"

MacAndrews had looked, and his lips had begun to mouth a comforting disclaimer, but he had stopped in its midst, aware that his eyes had betrayed his real conviction. "But it's the strain of this thing that is killing you, Hobart. As soon as it is settled you will be all right again. You know that's true. You are taking it too hard."

Again Smallin's only response was a question. "What chance is there of clearing it up within six months?" he asked.

And again MacAndrew's eyes supplied the answer.

"No," Smallin muttered. "It's got me, just as it did those others. I don't know how, but it has. If you could see what I do at times! This way there is a bare chance I can do something. I'm dead, anyway. Good-bye!"

And he had swung quickly aboard, locking and barring the door behind him, then pouring into the crack between the door and jamb the quick-setting cement that was to seal him in. And a moment later the ship had lifted.

No one of the few who were aware of its going ever thought to see it again. But they were mistaken.

THREE months later, moving under automatic control, the car appeared over the earth, where it came under the influence of the Interplanet's landing controls and was guided slowly toward the big field, settling down as gently as if obeying the hand of Smallin on the controls within. The staff, assembled by the astonishing news, rushed out to meet it.

And then a strange thing occurred. The whole group halted in the same instant, as though an invisible hand had reached out from the car to bar their way. The actual agent, however, was not a hand, but a sense of impending horror which hit all with devastating effect. While the group drew back in that excess of terror, there came an explosion within the car, and the door was blown outward. A moment later Smallin staggered out.

It was only because they knew Smallin had been within that they knew it was he. And at that sight the group broke and fled—fled screaming, yelling, clawing madly at unnamable horror. Smallin halted, stood there, indescribable. It seemed that no human could have altered so and still possessed life. That, possibly, was the key. He may not have possessed human life such as we know it. And yet

the man was alive in some way. He did move, and the integrity of his original purpose still lived to actuate him and control his movements and speech.

Seeing that he was standing quietly, a few of those in whom the element of iron was most pronounced turned and forced themselves back toward him, against the frantic opposition of every instinct of their beings. To the relief of that instinct Smallin halted then with a gesture at a distance of some forty paces.

"For God's sake!" his words came horribly. "Don't come closer! It might get you! If its tentacles once clutch your brain, no power can get them loose!"

"What! What——" MacAndrew was stammering, the first time in a life of decisive action. "There is nothing. You—imagine it. There is absolutely nothing!"

"That's the damnableness of it," the weird Thing answered. "There is. It's fast to me like a rubber band that has been stretching and stretching and as it stretched pulling and sucking on my brain! I can't hold against it much longer. Go into the car. The story is there. But this is what I must say, and I had to show you myself to make you believe. Never allow anyone near that cursed spot. Keep away. Nothing—nothing can fight That!" A note of wilder terror entered his voice. "Run! Run!" he shrieked. "I can't hold it off. If I touch you—oh, God! Keep off! Keep off!"

The group was split by then, and fleeing desperately. MacAndrew dared a look behind, and fled more horrified for what he saw—or didn't see. For where the thing that had been Smallin had just stood, there was bare ground. No human speed could have taken him the distance to the nearest concealment in the second. And, as a search soon proved, he had not hidden either in the car or among the surrounding buildings. He had

vanished, as the missing cars had gone.

It was an hour before the car was entered and the diary was found. The contents of the diary are a part of the mystery, for it was destroyed by its soul-sick readers. Of the four who read it, MacAndrews lasted the longest—a few weeks more than a year. Nervous breakdown, collapse from overwork and strain—so the physician's pronouncements ran. I signed MacAndrews' death certificate myself.

So even science does not know what the diary contained. But the Interplanet routes all travel wide of that red orbit traced on all of its charts without explanation. The strict orders which the government has issued that all travelers must avoid the zone is usually believed to mean that the Department of Defense has set it aside as a military reservation, on which it conducts dangerous experiments and maneuvers.

I WAS with MacAndrews when he died. And I do not want to see another such passing.

He went completely out of his head. He imagined awful things—or was it that the resistance which he had built in his mind against even thinking of them had broken down in the last moments? I wish I knew. I would feel better if I thought that raving was only delirium. But—then I recall how it checked up with what went before.

"Burleigh," he mumbled the Defense Secretary's name, "here is the diary. I—haven't read it yet. Wanted your moral support," he cackled terribly.

"It is unbelievable," his voice erupted again, shakily. "Human mind—can not picture. But if you can not you can do nothing. And if you can you can also—do nothing. Nothing!" His voice sank for a moment, and I leaned forward to see if the end had come. I had another



patient to whom time meant much, but yet I could not leave this dying man.

"—world founded on horror as ours is on atoms," he mumbled on. "Atoms of horror, inhabited by horror of all shapes. A billion horrors, clawing — sucking — freezing the spine."

His facial muscles were working horribly, but I could not tear my gaze away.

"A planet, but not of rock. A Thing of stuff without material existence. Horror become matter—invisible — all-powerful. Once men on earth saw forms of nothingness that rode, twisting horribly, the clouds and the winds clucking with loathsome glee, grinning hellishly, as they roved the night suckled by the deadly moon. I understand now! A planet of horror revolved about the earth, an attendant moon. Pace with the farther moon it kept, consorting with it in its play of hell, reaching and sucking out the minds of those who exposed themselves to its grip. Those old horror legends! God! How horrible their basis is!"

He was carried away with the surge of the thing.

"I recognize it now," he screamed, "that strange prickling feeling which starting at the base of the brain runs

up and down the spine and circles the brain when horror grips a man. It is a relic of days when the Things like This clutched through the dark to insert their freezing talons in the gray matter of the medulla oblongata. God!" His voice was beginning to fail. "What a relief it—get out of this car—back—free then of this—frozen sucking that burns through—my brain. It will go when I—no longer—oppose it."

His voice rose in one last ecstasy of horror.

"Then I will fight and play and fly with the shapes that course out there where the sun is no more than a star. Shapes you have never seen, and pray to God you—never see! I will exist forever with the Horrors, a Horror myself, coming and going—shrieking and howling—sucking at the throats of indescribable Horror, and feeling its suck at my throat! Whirling in dark that only hides from human eyes the joys I will know! Joys of clawing—of unmentionable things—of——"

He said more—a few words, before he finally died. But hardly printable. Except where they are imprinted terribly in my mind. I hope no one is present when I die. I might forget myself and repeat all that MacAndrews did.

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