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# Weird Tales

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1953

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D. McILWRAITH, Editor

Only facts would interest the head of the Homicide Bureau; not fantasy.



# THE RED BALLOON

BY Q. PATRICK

THE receptionist at the Brae-side County Hospital was decidedly snooty. Nor did she condescend to remove her high hat even when I showed my press

card from the *Sentinel Courier*. She had orders, she said.

I had orders, too, said I, and I fingered in my pocket the Colt .32 which I always carried when

Heading by Vincent Napoli

calling on any case which had the least whiff of homicide. Finally, I told her that if I couldn't see either Lieutenant Trant or Dr. Beardsley quick, pronto, *tout de suite*, there'd be an explosion which—

So she said she'd see.

The explosion, as it happened, had occurred two hours earlier. And I had, quite unwittingly, heard of it first from my young daughter Barbara, when I fetched her from a special Sunday School Class, around noon. She had simply said, "Something awfully funny happened to the two Greiser kids when we came out of school just now. Miss Bedford shooed us away, but there was a red balloon, and well, Ellie Spence said that the Greiser kids were hurt or something."

I had not given the matter another thought until the middle of our Sunday dinner, when the telephone started shrilling like mad. It was the Big Boss himself, so I knew it was important. Howard Greiser's two daughters had—well he didn't know what, but I was to get myself to the Braeside County Hospital at once and ask for either Dr. Beardsley or Trant. And since Trant's name was synonymous with Homicide, I presumed the Greiser children had been murdered, or at best kidnapped. Anyhow, it must have been something pretty sensational to get the Big Boss so excited

on a Sunday. Hence my belligerency and the gun.

MEANWHILE the receptionist had been "seeing"—and finally a female appeared and beckoned. I followed her along subterranean corridors until we reached a room which, from its smell of formaldehyde, I knew to be the morgue. It was full of doctors, arguing, discussing or merely staring. Amongst them was my celebrated uncle, Professor Edgar Saltus.

The attention of them all was fixed on two small figures lying on marble slabs. I took one glimpse, and that was enough. The things—for one could scarcely call them human bodies—were shrivelled and shrunken like two little old monkeys, or like corpses deep-buried centuries ago.

They were, I presumed—and presumed rightly—the remains of the two Greiser children to whom, as Barbara had put it, "something awfully funny" had happened that noon. Quickly, fearfully, I dismissed the shuddering thought that one of those "things" might have been Barbara herself.

I was glad when Tim Trant detached himself from the medics and came over to me. Though a traditional terror to the malefactor, Trant was as pleasant a fellow as one could wish to meet. We had been friends at Prince-

ton, and he gave the *Sentinel Courier* a break whenever possible.

"Let's get out of here," he suggested, much to my relief. In the passage we lit cigarettes and inhaled deeply.

"When I first heard about it," he said, "it sounded like another of those darn flying saucer scares. But—" He shrugged—"you've seen for yourself. And there's no need for me to tell you who or what Howard Greiser is. He could break you and me, the *Sentinel Courier*, the whole New York Police Force if he wanted to."

Then Dr. Beardsley came out too, and between them they gave me the facts as they were known to date. And I report them as they later appeared in the evening edition of the *Sentinel Courier*.

### SUNDAY SCHOOL TRAGEDY

*A strange and, as yet, unexplained tragedy occurred today at the well-known Braeside School for Girls, when Mary (Minnie) and Eveline (Evie) Greiser, aged 9 and 10 respectively, lost their lives. The two children—daughters of Howard Greiser, widely known as a manufacturer and philanthropist—were taken to the school as usual by the old family chauffeur. Both were in*

*excellent spirits and perfect health. The car waited outside the school gates—a little longer than usual, since the junior girls had been rehearsing a Nativity Play for the Christmas Festival, and there was also a short presentation of seasonal gifts by the school authorities. Shortly after noon the chauffeur (Joe Williams, 56) saw the children emerging, and opened the door of the car ready for Minnie and Evie. Snow was falling lightly at the time. The younger girl came alone to the car and, while waiting for her sister, remarked on the fact that there was a red balloon in the air, just by a low group of bushes, not fifteen feet from the school gates.*

*The chauffeur, as well as Miss Ethel Bedford, a Braeside teacher, and several children saw what they described as an ordinary, child's balloon. They paid no attention to it, thinking it had perhaps broken loose from one of the many Christmas trees that line the Braeside roads. Anyhow, Evie remarked to the chauffeur: "Someone's balloon is flying away. It's not very high. I'll go and catch it."*

*Impulsively, she ran across the snow-covered grass and disappeared behind the bushes. The chauffeur waited a few minutes, and then went to investigate. To his horror he found what seemed to be the lifeless bodies of Min-*

nie and Evie, lying in the snow a few feet from each other. His cries brought the school porter and several staff members, who soon summoned aid from both doctors and police.

All this took place within the space of less than five minutes.

Who or what had been lurking behind those bushes to deal such swift and terrible destruction to two innocent children?

No intruder had been seen on the school grounds, and the Police have no theory to offer, since the falling snow had covered any potential footprints. There was no signs of violence and no visible wounds, external or internal, to account for the deaths.

The medical experts are equally baffled, since the disease—if disease it was—had struck so suddenly, and presented post-mortem symptoms unfamiliar to our pathologists. Mention was made of a type of galloping anaemia, sometimes concomitant with certain oriental maladies, but no case has ever been reported in this hemisphere.

That death was instantaneous and probably painless seems to be proved by the fact that numbers of children passed within a few yards of the fatal spot, and none of them heard a cry or even a faint moan.

Miss Ethel Bedford, the teacher who presented the gifts to the children, states that they were of

a religious nature and certainly comprised no balloons, red or otherwise.

The bereaved parents are offering a reward of \$10,000 for information leading to the arrest of any person or persons responsible for what must, we feel, be classed as a cruel and motiveless crime.

SUCH was the story I phoned in from the hospital. Trant was waiting for me at the receptionist's desk.

"It's all very well for you," he said gloomily. "You journalists can spin out yarns on vampires, murderous balloons, flying saucers, little men, unknown poisons, impossible maladies—anything your readers will swallow. But what am I to report to my hard-boiled chief on the Homicide Squad? He wants real facts to chew on."

"You might suggest that he start chewing on the works of Charles Fort." A familiar, rather squeaky voice sounded from behind me. "And perhaps even my own popular articles in the *Sentinel Courier*."

My uncle, Professor Edgar Saltus, had moved noiselessly towards us and was staring at Trant over an antiquated pair of spectacles. He was an elfish, wizened little man with a large, baldish head, and clothes that looked as though he slept in them. I had adored him as a child, and now,

despite the crankiness that accompanied his increasing age, I respected him and enjoyed his company inordinately.

He had turned now and was addressing me severely.

"And as for you, Edgar James, you should tell that boss of yours to read his correspondence more carefully. I've written to him every day this week. I've warned him to have his correspondents all over the world on the look-out for something of this sort. I knew it would happen, and I told him so.

Of course, I couldn't guess that it would happen here—right in our own back yard, but—"

"You mean, you knew—?" I asked excitedly.

"Of course I knew; but those old fogies wouldn't understand if I told them." A contemptuous thumb designated the specialists—some of them really famous—whom I had seen in the morgue. "But if you *young men* really want to hear, you can come along with me to my laboratory."

Having left the necessary instructions with the now less-snooty receptionist, both Trant and I accepted the offer with delight.

**M**Y UNCLE was one of the most colorful and certainly the most controversial figure in the scientific world. The letters after his name might have circled

one of the astral spheres which he tossed about so lightly.

Some called him a charlatan, despite the fact that he had won the Nobel Prize before he was forty and held an honorary Chair in four or five of the world's greatest Universities. He had been distinguished as a biologist, pharmacologist, physicist and many other things in his time, shifting his interest as soon as he felt he had exhausted the possibilities of the science in question. I had often heard him say—and modesty was not one of his cardinal virtues—that he was the only man living who could talk intelligently with Einstein on his particular subject. But there was *no* man living who could talk to him, Professor Saltus, on all his numerous specialties. Recently he had chosen to style himself as the world's greatest astronomer.

And I was not the man to prove him wrong.

One great gift he had which is rare among great scientists. He could talk and write on the most recondite subjects accurately and scientifically, and yet so simply that an intelligent boy of fifteen could understand him. This gift, being usually considered incompatible with really expert scientific knowledge, had made him an outcast among his lesser contemporaries. But it had made him a fortune, and had, incidentally, tripled the circulation of the-

*Sentinel Courier's* Sunday supplement, where, in kindness to me, he had contributed such famous articles as: *And Why not Life on Venus?*, *The "Lost" Planet*, *Out Goes Our Sun*, and many others. Although I was his normal heir, he was, as he often told me, leaving his money to increase in an enormous trust fund, to be used at some distant date when men would dare really to think for themselves, and when a trip to the moon would be no more than a one-block ride in a bus.

WE DROVE to his so-called laboratory in a nearby New York suburb. It was an enormous room, whose walls were so thickly lined with books that no self-respecting fly could have found sufficient wall-space. There were no intricate machines, no telescopes, microscopes or other paraphernalia such as one might expect in a scientist's laboratory. The only sign of his astronomical interests was a ticker-tape which was connected with Mount Palomar in California.

He sat us down side by side like school children, and handed us a scrap-book containing newspaper clippings, either actual or as photostatic copies. These were in many languages, but in each case the English translation was typed neatly below.

While we studied them, he made fussy little preparations—

for he had a childlike desire always to put on a good show, with himself "playing teacher"—and at last mounted a small rostrum between two screens.

He began a trifle bombastically:

"You are neither of you much over thirty, and you have witnessed today what seems to you an unpredictable and utterly unprecedented event. It is my intention to try and prove that it is neither unprecedented nor inexplicable—in fact it was perhaps predictable and certainly precedented."

He pointed to the scrap-book on our knees.

"You can hardly have taken proper cognizance of that first item, since it occurred in Finland, and at a time when you were probably in your cradles. Perhaps you'd give me the high lights, Edgar James."

I read: "Strange malady epidemic among school-children in Trjon, a small village in Finland. Bloodless corpses found—mostly children—vampirism suspected. No marks on throat or body."

"And the next," said my uncle, "is from Nova Scotia, I believe, About the time I was in my cradle."

It was the same story again, and the next time in Colombo, Ceylon. Then, much earlier, a clipping from the Cape of Good Hope; another, dating back to the 18th century, from Turkey. They all told of sudden, unexplained

deaths among children; and each one, allowing for changing styles of journalism, might have been the same story as was even then on the *Sentinel Courier's* presses for the midnight edition.

"My attention was drawn to these gruesome little incidents by my late and very much lamented friend Mr. Charles Fort. All similar of course, but—I wonder if you notice any other point of similarity?"

My uncle screwed up his puckered little face and stared at us like a hopeful school-teacher.

"Well, they seem to be about thirty years apart," put in Trant.

"Good boy." My uncle beamed. "Actually it's twenty-eight of our years and forty-seven weeks: very good. That's what put me on the track. You've read, of course, my article on what the *Sentinel Courier* was pleased to misname 'The 'Lost' Planet?'"

Had I read it? Had I not had to defend it against not only my own better judgment but against that of scientist and layman alike? Had I not—or well—anyhow, I suppose my uncle saw disbelief in our faces.

"And, of course, you don't believe it. You wouldn't because I could not prove it—at least, not with any figures that our modern scientists could understand. And—more important—I could not show it, even though I *could* plot its orbit. I could compute roughly

that this planet, when at its closest proximity to us and to Mars, as it is at present, would appear to us terrestrials as slightly smaller than the moon. But—" He flicked on a light, illuminating a small screen. "Here's the Solar System; not in scale of course, but as our ignoramuses tell us and think it to be."

I saw the ordinary chart of the sun with its revolving planets, such as I had seen them (excepting the parvenu Pluto) since childhood. Then my uncle clicked on another switch, and a large circle of light started on a moving orbit, beyond the asteroid belt, somewhere between the paths of Mars and Jupiter.

"There," exclaimed my uncle, "is Saltus, the invisible planet; and that is approximately its orbit. When I wrote that article for the *Sentinel Courier* I had no actual proof of its existence—at least no visible proof. Now I have what, to me, is visible proof. You have heard of Dr. Hans Wertherberg, the great German archaeologist,— unquestionably the greatest that ever lived?"

**W**E BOTH nodded, perhaps a trifle vaguely. But somewhere the name rang a bell in connection with mammoths.

"He was captured in Germany and sent to Siberia by the Russians. Being old and feeble they let him tinker about in his own



way. There is a heart-rending story of how he discovered in an ice-flow the frozen body of a whole, perfectly preserved mammoth. He couldn't speak Russian so as to tell his guards and the neighboring peasants of the immense value of their find. To those half starved, ignorant people it meant meat—fresh meat—and he was obliged to watch them gorge themselves on a carcass which was probably millions of years old. Finally, seeing the hopelessness of his plight, he ate some too, and declared to me it tasted as fresh and palatable as any steak from the butcher's!

"But it served its purpose. After that he became a sort of pet of the Soviets, and they even gave him men and supplies to help him with his excavations. This enabled him to discover something of far more interest archaeologically than the mammoth. He unearthed certain pre-prehistoric drawings, scratched on the walls of buried caves. These drawings, in his opinion and my own, antedate by millions of years anything discovered hitherto. When released, he smuggled photographs of them out, and brought them to me before he died. You shall see for yourselves."

He switched on another light, and we saw on a small screen what might have been a sketch by a young child.

"There is Man—our earliest

ancestor by an incalculable number of years—but without a doubt he is Man. He stands upright, bearing on his shoulder some primitive tool or club. And there is our sun—the same sun we see today: and we recognize it as the sun rather than the moon by the lines emanating from it which express its rays." The picture was changed.

"And there is Man, this time lying asleep beneath a full moon: and we distinguish the moon from the sun by the fact that it has no emanating rays. You will notice, too, that there is what looks like a small sun in the corner. It is far too large to be either Venus or Mars, our nearest known neighbors. I believe it to be the planet Saltus, depicted at a point in its orbit far from the earth. Look again. The man is lying asleep, and there is the moon, a crescent now; but you see another globe, almost as large as the moon or the sun. That, I believe, is Saltus, the so-called 'lost' planet, as it appeared to our ancestors when in closest proximity to the earth. It is exactly as we should see it now, this very evening, if it were not—invisible."

**H**E TURNED his attention to the other chart of our solar system. "Here we have its present position, near Mars, and with Mars at its nearest to the earth.

Such a proximity, according to my calculations, occurs once every twenty-eight years and forty-seven weeks."

He stopped, waiting for a torrent of questions, which I for one was too stunned to put. Finally Trant's voice came, haltingly, like a schoolboy's.

"But, sir? If it *was* there, and if it is there still, as you say, why can't we see it? Planets don't just disappear—?"

"How do you know they don't, young man? Take the group of stars and planets which we call Andromeda. Although nearly a million light-years away from us, it is constantly changing. Stars larger than our sun explode, disappear and re-appear like fireworks.

So do their families of planets—each one, perhaps larger than our Jupiter. Nothing is impossible, and nothing 100% predictable. The so-called comet of Halley, due in 1896—but I am off the point. Your question was a good one and I can give you only my guess in answer. Saltusians are, scientifically, aeons ahead of us. Some millions of years ago they possibly discovered the secret of invisibility, and, for reasons best known to themselves, they decided to make their world invisible—or more probably they moved it and themselves into another dimension. Imagine the consternation of our earliest for-

bears when their 'second moon' suddenly disappeared!

"That they had learnt the secrets of space-navigation is obvious. My own belief is that they colonized the planet we call Mars and abandoned it for some reason, using it merely as a sort of fuelling station. Perhaps they found it lacking in some basic element they needed. Certainly they have never to our knowledge been much interested in our earth, except as an object of curiosity."—

"But why—? I just don't get that," I put in.

"Let me try and explain myself better." My uncle sighed patiently. "Try to imagine yourself as Christopher Columbus. Europe is a planet moving on a fixed orbit. The Azores Islands are another planet, and America another more distant planet. There are times when your Europe orbit brings you very close to the Azores orbit—a mere ride in a speed-boat, but nothing much to see when you get there. And there are inevitably times, though less frequent, when, by merely re-fuelling at the Azores (Mars) planet, you can take another little jaunt in a speed-boat to the America (Earth) planet. Perhaps its potentialities have been exhausted millions of years ago, by your ancestors. It is not worth exploitation on a large scale: but there are always Columbuses,

fired by nothing more than curiosity, or a desire for a short trip—”

“You mean,” said Trant, “that when this invisible planet, Mars and the earth are in closest conjunction, which arrives roughly every twenty-nine years, we are favored with a visit?”

“Exactly,” said my uncle. “Probably nothing more than a Saltusian kid on an Earth spree.”

“And we can’t see them because they are in a different dimension, but they can see us, and they can nourish themselves by—”

Trant broke off at the sound of the telephone. My uncle picked up the receiver. “It’s for you, Mr—er—”

Trant seized it from him. “Yes, yes . . . still in Braeside . . . a little boy . . . Bobby Needick . . . trimming a Christmas-tree on the lawn. . . .”

I felt a cold sweat breaking out all over me. The Needicks were near neighbors, and Bobby was a close pal of Barbara’s. No one except those few concerned were aware of the awful danger. Our evening edition had not yet appeared, and no police warning had been given so far as I knew. The children in our garden suburb might well be running about as freely as ever.

“His mother left him for less than two minutes to answer the phone. When she came back—

same thing. Even the red balloon.” Trant took up his hat. “Better get going.”

**I** MUST hand it to Uncle Edgar that he did not let scientific curiosity entirely outweigh his humane feelings at this third tragedy. He even made vague, clucking noises of sympathy. But as we piled into the car, he could not help saying: “Perhaps there will be visible tracks if those idiotic policemen. . . .”

Personally I was not thinking of tracks or policemen. I was thinking only of Barbara—for it was not yet her bedtime, and she might well be putting the finishing touches to our modest Christmas-tree on the lawn. I requested to be dropped off at my home.

When we reached our suburb it was light as day, with a full moon, street lights and the rows of illuminated Christmas-trees. It was only two days before the great festival of love and goodwill, but I was gripping the revolver in my pocket and there was murder in my heart—murder for that Saltusian “kid on an Earth spree,” as my uncle had put it.

As I reached the house, my worst fears were realized. Barbara was on the lawn alone, gaily tossing the last strips of tinsel on to the branches of our tree, from which hung balls of red and silver amongst the electric candles.

I jumped out of the car, falling on to the snow that banked the side-walk. But I did not lose my grip on my revolver.

"Oh, Daddy—you do look funny—" she began, and ran towards me. And as she did so a red, or rather, a pinkish globule seemed to detach itself from the tree and follow her. I flung my left arm around her, pressing her to me, but even as I raised my revolver with my right hand, I felt Barbara being lifted from my grasp by some powerful and invisible force. The sphere, or whatever it was, was a yard or two away from the tree now, and hung just above my daughter's head.

I fired twice, three times over Barbara's shoulder, full into that

pinkish globule. Then, gradually, I felt the tension on her relax. The sphere had vanished, but—and this I hardly dare to set down—I distinctly saw my three bullets hanging in the air, motionless, on a level with my head. They were discovered later, near the Christmas-tree, in a small patch of pinkish snow.

But my first interest was to get my poor bewildered Barbara safely into the house, and then to ossify myself with half a tumbler of neat Bourbon.

NOT long afterwards my uncle arrived. He had witnessed the shooting from the car, and had spent a happy half hour peering about in the snow.

He seemed satisfied, and not at

all upset by the tragedy which had nearly overtaken his great-niece.

"I think," he said, rubbing his knotty old hands together, "that we have proved they are vulnerable to even such simple terrestrial implements as a revolver."

"Thank God for that," I said fervently.

"And this time I have prints—prints which enable me to add something to the composite picture I have in mind."

Then he went over to my desk and started what looked like a doodle.

Finally he handed the result to me. "Not accurate, of course—and I imagine the size would be roughly equivalent to that of *Homo Sapiens*. We shall never know, I fear. Those filaments are what we would call "arms," and also the—er—tubes by which it nourishes itself. Even if visible, they would be thinner than the thinnest needle."

I looked in horror at the gruesome and quite undescribable creature he had sketched, and labelled: "YOUNG (?) SALTU-SIAN."

It had the three-toed feet of an ostrich, and thinnish legs, surmounted by a box-like torso from which emanated numerous fine filaments. In the center of the box, in a position roughly equivalent to that of the human

stomach, was a round circle. The head was shrouded and indistinct except for two wing-like ears. The general aspect was improbable and sinister.

"And the red balloon?" I asked. "Where does that come into the picture?"

My uncle looked at me with mock severity over his spectacles. "You haven't read your H. G. Wells, young man: otherwise you'd know that when an invisible creature nourishes itself on a visible substance, that substance remains visible until it is digested by the invisible stomach. There was a pinkish material under your Christmas-tree: I think that will be found to be human blood, partly digested. Remember that our friend had visited the Needicks before coming to you, and—"

"Stop!" I cried in utter revulsion.

"It's—it's too ghastly!"

My uncle spread out his hands and shrugged. "But we've got a lot to be thankful for. So far they've 'come but single spies'—young Columbus, urged by curiosity to visit a decadent world. In twenty-eight yeras, forty-seven weeks, they may decide to come in battalions. Perhaps—"

But he did not finish the sentence, because at that moment my wife came in and cheerfully announced supper.