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Table of Contents

Feature Serial Novel:

- THE INCREDIBLE INVASION (Part 1) *Murray Leinster* . . . 6
Something was happening—like a pestilence—hitting spots—then cities—and one man alone knew the answer.

Novel:

- PROTEUS ISLAND *Stanley G. Weinbaum* 96
Strange things happened here—it was taboo—and he was beginning to see why.

Novelette:

- THE RETURN OF THE MURIANS . *Nat Schachner* . . . 60
A tale of vast distances in time and space—and memory—

Short Stories:

- EN ROUTE TO PLUTO *Wallace West* . . . 39
Which has to do with the usefulness of wings.
- A LEAK IN THE FOUNTAIN OF YOUTH *A. R. Long* . . . 48
By the author of "Scandal in the 4th Dimension."
- THE SCARAB *Raymond Z. Gallun* . . . 80
A fascinating idea—and possible!
- BLACK LIGHT *Ralph Milne Farley* . . . 87
A plot which depended on science.

Serial Novel:

- THE COMETEERS (Conclusion) . . . *Jack Williamson* . . . 121
Ending the epic sequel to "The Legion of Space."

Science Feature:

- MERCURY *John W. Campbell, Jr.* 91
Article 3 covering the Solar System. This month it is Einstein's World.

Readers' Department:

- BRASS TACKS (The Open House of Controversy) 154
- EDITOR'S PAGE 153

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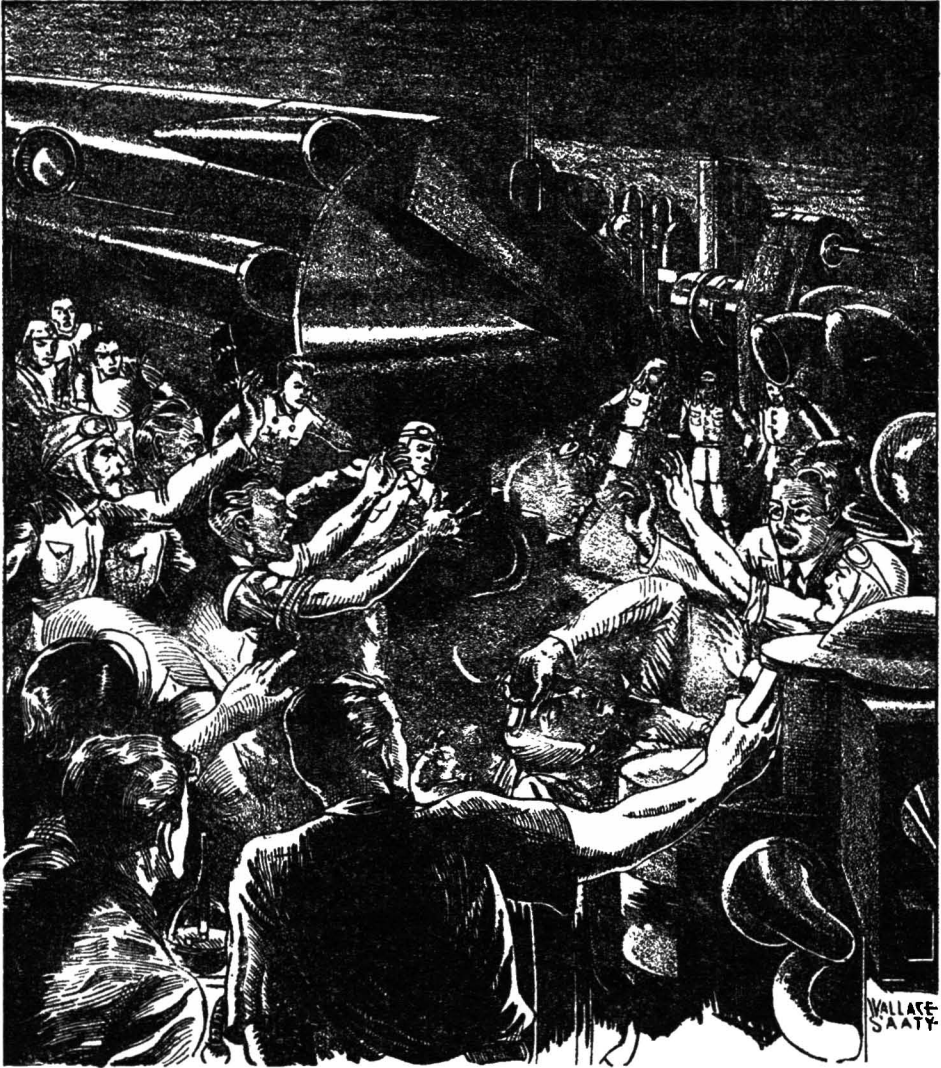
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The Scarab

Surprise—and the fiendish elusiveness of their foe—were their undoing.

by Raymond Z. Gallun

THE MESSAGE sped through the ether at 7:40 p. m., Eastern Standard Time. At 7:43 the Scarab crept out on a window ledge of the room topping a tall building popularly known as the N. J. House.

The Scarab paused on its perch for a moment, as if to determine for itself whether it was perfectly fit for action. It was a tiny thing, scarcely more than an inch and a half in length. The fancy of the craftsman who had made it, had

given to the Scarab the form of the beetle after which it was named. But its body had a metallic sheen, and its vitals were far more intricate than those of the finest watch.

The Scarab rubbed its hind legs together, as flies will do when at rest. Then, apparently satisfied that it was in condition, it unfolded the coleopteralike plates over its wings. With a buzz that any uninformed person would have mistaken for that of a beetle, it started out on its journey.

There were only two who observed its departure. Both were in the uppermost chamber of the N. J. House. One was a hard-faced fellow who watched the Scarab with keen interest; the other was a slight, wizened chap, whose legs were off at the knee. The latter sat in a wheel chair before a white screen, beneath which were many strange instruments, levers, and buttons.

The pair conversed in low tones, making frequent mention of Dr. Clyde Allison, best-known scientist of the year, 1947. Their features were gaunt with strain.

But the Scarab itself betrayed no evidence of any emotional upset. The nervous quickness of its movements spoke only of swift, smooth efficiency.

It dipped in its flight; and its quartz-lensed eyes took in the scene below. There was unusual activity in the city streets. Crowds of people, drawn suddenly from work and amusement alike, stared fearfully at the evening sky. Lights winked with a suggestion of feverish tension.

There were excited shouts and cries detectable to the sensitive, microphonic ears of the Scarab. The noise of traffic was a steady roar. Stubby, waspish ships patrolled the air; and on the ground, in park and plaza, gleaming, high-angle guns were already being wheeled into position.

The Scarab's inspection of these preparations, was brief but intense. No

one saw the tiny, metal fabrication; or if they did they thought it only a large, vagrant insect. But the Scarab possessed more than an insect's powers. Steeply, and at terrific speed, it arose, until it reached the cold, unresistant texture of the stratosphere. There it straightened out and tore southward, the minute motor that drove its purring wings drawing its energy from the same wireless power plants which supplied most of the larger mechanisms, on the ground and in the air.

A HALF HOUR WENT BY. The miles reeled past beneath, far more rapidly than the fleeting minutes. The distant, cloud-flecked terrain was gray and blurred in the thickening dusk; for all lights in the cities and villages had now been extinguished as a precautionary measure.

But at last the Scarab approached a place around which a faint, golden halo clung. The little mechanism plummeted down toward the spot. The phenomenon which covered it, was like a huge, inverted funnel of witch fire, brewed in the caldron of science. Beneath its enveloping luminescence was a hill, shaggy with dense woods and undergrowth. Above the tops of the trees a blunt, metal-capped tower projected. From this cap the lethal halo originated, playing downward like a spray of a fountain to meet an encircling ring of basal electrodes on the ground.

Swift pursuit planes and bombers swung in wide arcs about the hill. Every now and then one or several of them would attempt to fly over the fiery cone; but slender beams of the same texture as the protecting halo itself, would grope toward them, and they would either turn back in hasty retreat or they would be drawn by the mysterious attraction of the beams, and pulled to crashing destruction in the forest. Though the Scarab did not see any ship touch the halo, it was safe to as-

sume that its end would have been of a similar nature in such an event.

Around the hill there was evidence of other activities. Machine guns and light cannons were mounted there, their muzzles pointed toward the bizarrely flaming citadel. Men in olive uniforms crouched in the shadows. Swift tanks waited in concealed positions.

But this U. S. army unit was powerless to advance. Its members had learned their lesson. The same beams of attractive force which rendered the aircraft of no use, checkmated their every move. Those beams could tear the vitals from a man, and could so warp and twist even the heaviest machine, that it was unable to function.

The Scarab, however, did not hesitate. It was far too small to be noticed, or even seen, by either the mysterious defenders of the citadel, or by those that besieged it. Besides, the Scarab was not hampered by several other limitations which size imposes.

It flashed downward, coming to rest well ahead of the position of the besiegers. Thence it scrambled forward toward a point midway between two of the huge rods, or basal electrodes, which were mounted on the ground, helping to maintain the ethereal cone of fire which covered the hill. But this phosphorescent curtain was not quite complete. At its bottom, between the basal electrodes, were low gaps, bowing upward slightly, like flattened arches.

IT WAS through one of these gaps that the Scarab negotiated an easy entrance to the strange, substanceless fortification. The little mechanism crept past a pair of gray-uniformed guards who stood, glassy-eyed, close to a large tripod-mounted cylinder from which the attraction beam could be hurled. But these guards remained unaware of the presence of the tiny intruder.

Once more the Scarab took to its wings, flitting and buzzing erratically to-

ward the tower. It landed close to the stone walls of the structure.

About it, as it scrambled forward, were weeds and bushes and grass, which, from its miniature point of view, constituted a thick and threatening jungle. Once a field mouse, that had somehow acclimated itself to the fearful happenings that were going on around it, scampered across the Scarab's path. A few moments later a large, vicious-looking beetle barred the way, its chitinous mandibles opening and closing suggestively.

Under other, more leisurely circumstances the Scarab might have met this challenge with combat, as it had often done on other occasions, for the amusement of its now distant master; but there was no time for such byplay in this fascinating Tom Thumb world now.

Its every sense alert, the Scarab continued forward. Now it crept up the smooth face of the tower wall. Its eyes, gleaming in the eerie glow of the cone canopy above, were searching for a means of ingress. Presently a small, square window, slightly raised for ventilation, caught its attention. Several seconds later it was inside the building.

The whirl of machinery, and the sound of voices beckoned the Scarab to descend a spiral runway whose walls were lined with heavy cables. And so the little mechanism flitted its erratic course downward, through the half light afforded by small neon bulbs.

It traversed a power room where gigantic Diesels spun generators of similar dimensions. Evidently the present master of this citadel had made himself independent of the public wireless energy, which would put him too much at the mercy of the people, if he used it, since it could be shut off at any time. And though such action would cause vast inconvenience and the crippling of civic defenses, there was still the possibility that it might be done, if circumstances to warrant it arose.

PRESENTLY the Scarab reached a broad, low-ceilinged chamber, far enough below the surface to be completely immune to even the heaviest artillery fire. The place seemed to combine the features of a factory, laboratory, and hangar. It was brilliantly illumined.

Against one wall a score of rakish planes stood in a row. They were rocket planes, independent of all outside sources of energy. Each was equipped with spraying devices for the propagation of lethal gases, and each was fitted at its nose with both a pair of machine guns, and a small cylinder for the projection of the attraction beam. There was a wide, upslanting tunnel, obviously intended as an exit for the aircraft. It was to be presumed that during their return from a sally, the deadly halo around the tower and hill above could be turned off briefly; and since their helicopters allowed them to make perfect spot landings, there was little danger of their being damaged while coming to earth in rough country.

Quite unnoticed, as before, the Scarab buzzed into the great workroom as any intruding insect might, and sought the further security of a shadowed corner.

Carefully it studied its surroundings, the brilliant, analytical mind, far away now, that heard through its ear microphones, and saw by means of its synthetic vision, keenly active.

At the center of the room stood a craft such as had never yet flown in the atmosphere of the earth. It was a smooth, black cylinder, tapered at either end. There were electrode-like rods at both of its extremities, and there were several ports and an air lock on its visible side. Otherwise, nothing of its structure or principle was apparent. But somehow its waspishness suggested colossal speed, and fiendish capacities for destruction.

The weird vessel seemed very near completion, if, in fact, it was not yet

actually ready for flight. A number of men were busy removing from around it the metal supports which formed its cradle. All of those men's faces were blankly expressionless, and their eyes looked glazed and fixed.

It was the same with all but one of the other occupants of the room—there must have been fifty in all. At a workbench, bending over some papers and blue prints, was a man whom any school child would have recognized. He was Dr. Clyde Allison. But his fine old face and blue eyes were as blank as those of the assistants who crowded around him.

NEAR BY, twenty men clad in flying togs were lined up, each with a forearm bared. They stared rigidly ahead, like antique idols. Only the mystery who commanded them, moved. His small body was clad in a white smock; and he strode from one of the fliers to the next, jabbing the needle of a hypodermic syringe into the arm of each.

In appearance, he was not the kind of fellow one would expect him to be. His hair was white, and was cut like that of some nineteenth-century musician. His eyes were large and clear, and there were no wrinkles in his pink, smooth face.

But when he had finished his task with the fliers, he spoke; and that revealed more of his quality than anything else could.

"Attention, all!" he barked in a deep, commanding voice.

Like marionettes, every one in the room, including Dr. Allison, turned toward their chief.

"I am desperate," the latter went on. "That is to say that you are all desperate, for my will is your will, and my desires are your desires. I have made it so. Periodically I have injected into your blood streams a drug which renders you far more than normally sus-

ceptible to hypnotic suggestion.

"I tell you this to impress permanently and indelibly into your minds the unalterable fact that for now, and always, every one present is, and shall be, part of me. This has been so for four months, ever since I came here to Dr. Allison's laboratory, and, with certain rough persuasions, induced him to submit to an injection of the drug I invented. You were all his helpers then; and naturally you obeyed him when, after he had yielded entirely to my will, he ordered you to submit to the drug; for you trusted him, and he told you that the substance was harmless.

"And you are not sorry that you obeyed him; rather, you are very glad; for you have all taken part in a great achievement. Your every thought and act has been in sympathy with mine. Dr. Allison's great scientific genius has become my property and yours; and it has produced miracles. It has given us new gaseous poisons, far more deadly than any known before; it has given us the attraction beam; and, most important of all, it has revealed to us, at last, the means by which the atom can be made to yield up its energy. Thus Clyde Allison's most magnificent goal, the object of a lifetime of toil, has at last been reached.

"We have duped the world for a long time. By being careful we have made people believe that all was as usual here. But several days ago some spying officials became suspicious, and so we are in danger. The only thing to do is to be bold.

"We need radium. We need it, not as a fuel for the engines of the marvelous ship we have built, but as a catalyzer that will enable us to release energy from the atoms that compose water, or sand, or ordinary earth, within those engines. We have demanded, in a message to the United States some minutes ago, that all available radium be de-

livered to us at once; we have promised sever punishment if our request is ignored.

"There is some danger that what we have asked for shall be refused us. But in that event we must be hard; for our present position is unpleasant, and our future is at stake.

"ONCE we have sufficient radium, we can demand from civilization all that we could wish for. For then our ships will fly with the speed of meteors, and will thus be invulnerable to attack. For weapons it will have atomic blasts, against which no force, not similarly equipped, could ever stand. Those weapons shall enable us to compel obedience to my will—to our will. We shall have the world power we crave. But, at present, with nothing but the half gram of radium which we used as a catalyzer in small test engines and blast tubes, we are still the potential pawns of chance.

"I speak to you all; but in particular I speak to you who are pilots of the planes. I know that your loyalty to our cause will be severely tried if it happens that you must fly forth to fulfill our promise of vengeance in case delivery of the radium is refused us. And so I have administered to you pilots a precautionary overdose of the suggestive-receptivity drug.

"I am sorry that if we must take drastic action you will have to use things so comparatively crude as planes and lethal gases to carry out our purpose. But, even so, these rocket-powered ships are half again as swift as any aircraft employed for military use by the United States. And there is not the remotest doubt of the superior effectiveness of our vaporous poisons. Though your numbers are few, the havoc you can bring about should be appalling. The attraction beams will also provide you with a big advantage. I believe that if

we must, we can change refusal to agreement without much delay.

"Perhaps some of you will die. But remember that death is little, and that our will and object is the only thing that should concern us. Remember, too, that the name of Boris Kolin is the name of your god. Do you all understand?"

Like obedient puppets the pilots nodded. "We understand, Boris Kolin!" they intoned.

And the other men in the room, Dr. Allison among them, nodded in the same mechanical way, and uttered the same words of submission.

"It is well," said Boris Kolin. "And now I shall remind the people of this fair country of ours that they have been imposed upon—insistently!"

He moved toward a radio microphone. Swift fingers set the transmitter in operation.

"Citizens of the United States," Kolin said, "it is now 8:25 p. m., Eastern Standard Time. At 7:40 I made a request that all available radium in the country be brought to Dr. Clyde Allison's laboratory. No answer to this request has yet been made. In fifteen minutes the hour which I granted you to decide upon an affirmative or negative reply shall have passed.

"Is any amount of radium worth a million human lives? I assure you that I am well able to account for that many of my enemies, if I make a sudden aerial attack on any one, or several, of the larger cities. My planes are the swiftest that exist; my weapons were invented by Clyde Allison himself. The effectiveness of an assault upon a densely populated metropolis, even when it is gallantly defended, is well known. That is all. I await your decision."

Kolin snapped off the transmitter. He turned now to the receiver, an unholy smile twitching on his pink, childlike face. But his hands never touched the switches of the receiver.

THE MIND that controlled the Scarab had seen and heard enough. Now it decided that the moment in which to act had come.

With a whir, the Scarab shot from the concealing shadows of the corner where it had hidden itself. Its aim was true. It struck the back of Kolin's pink neck; and for a fraction of a second it clung there, its metal mandibles biting deep into flesh. A tiny part of a drop of liquid was injected into its victim's blood stream. That liquid was less subtle, though far more potent, than the renegade scientist's suggestion-receptivity drug.

Kolin's smile changed to a look of idiotic surprise. He gave a thick cry and dropped to the floor. For several hours he would remain in a coma, before the effects of the devilish stuff wore off.

Pandemonium followed, as the Scarab sought to put all of Kolin's hypnotized subjects, present in the room, out of action. Those men did not think of retreat; but surprise, and the fiendish elusiveness and quickness of their minute foe, was their undoing. With arms flailing, they sought to bring the Scarab down; but one by one instead, they fell into the same deep sleep which had conquered their master. Twice the Scarab was caught in closed hands that tried to crush its vitals. But those hands received, instead, a sharp bite, and the numbing, liquid caress of unconsciousness.

At last all was still in the great workshop.

The Scarab alighted momentarily on the breast of Dr. Allison, to see if the noted scientist was seriously injured. But he was not; he was only senseless like his companions. And like them he would recover. The effects of Kolin's drug would wear off, too, and the doctor would be himself again. His genius and his achievements were not lost.

The Scarab darted toward the spiral

runway. There were still the defenders outside the citadel to be disposed of; but since they could not number more than a dozen, and since each pair of them, operating one of the several attraction-beam projectors, could be approached singly and stealthily, the task should not be difficult.

With the defenders out of action, the besieging soldiery beyond could be depended upon to break down several of the basal electrodes necessary to maintain the cone of golden light, with artillery fire. And it would be simple to choose from among the innocent captives, the one that was guilty.

IT WAS 8:43 p. m. in the topmost room of the N. J. House, more properly known as the National Justice Building.

The wizened little man leaned back wearily and triumphantly in his wheel chair. He drew his hands away from the complicated maze of levers and buttons before him. Those levers and buttons were the controls of the distant Scarab. By means of them, through a system of radio impulses, the intricate and tiny robot could be guided and directed. That radiovision screen there, still portraying a wild though satisfying view, pictured what the Scarab's eyes beheld. That speaker, supported in a mahogany box, reproduced the sounds heard by the Scarab's microphonic ears.

"Well, Chet," said the cripple with a grin, "am I still as good a government man as you are, or am I just a once-was?"

Chet Schroeder's hard features had softened a bit. In fact they still looked a little silly with chagrin.

"I never said you were a once-was, Nick," he complained. "So you can cut the sarcasm. But say! This is pretty swell! This little dinkus of yours can go anywhere! It can even crawl through a knot hole, and nobody'd know the difference! And you run no risk at all!

How'd you happen to invent the thing anyway?"

Nick Shipley turned his rueful gaze toward the pathetic stumps which had once been his knees. He shrugged.

"I didn't," he said. "No dumb detective like me ever could put together a thing as complicated as the Scarab. But I'm responsible for its invention in a way. The time I chased that crooked Ezmund guy up into the Rockies in winter time, and got gangrene in a pair of frozen feet, was the beginning.

"A fella can't just sit around, you know. And so I got to thinkin' that if I had a little radio-controlled robot to do my crook chasin' for me— Well, anyway, I wrote a letter to our good friend, Dr. Clyde Allison, explaining my situation, and putting a bug in his ear.

"After a while the Scarab and all the controls and stuff that go with it, were delivered here, and I got the job of skipper. That was about eight months ago, before Doc Allison ever heard of Kolin. Now, when there's a really hard piece of detectin' to do, it's usually assigned to me."

"Then Allison was saved by his own invention!" Chet Schroeder exclaimed.

"Yep!" Nick answered. "But you're supposed to keep quiet about all this, you understand. Most of the government dicks don't even know about the Scarab. Sometime soon I hope to take you on a hunting trip through the land of Lilliput, via my little pet. I hope you've got a good heart, because some of the insect monsters you're gonna see are liable to scare you plenty. And now we'd better shut up for a few seconds. I've got to start the Scarab back home to roost."

Nick Shipley leaned forward. Keys and levers moved under his flying fingers; and in his eyes there was a look of adventurous ecstasy.