

★ *Famous*
FANTASTIC
Mysteries ★

Vol. 1

NOVEMBER, 1939

No. 2



THIS magazine is the answer to thousands of requests that we have received over a period of years, demanding a second look at famous fantasies which, since their original publication, have become accepted classics. Our choice has been dictated by your requests and our firm belief that these are the aces of imaginative fiction.

—The Editors.



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THE FRANK A. MUNSEY COMPANY, Publisher, 280 Broadway, New York, N. Y.
WILLIAM T. DEWART, *President*

THE CONTINENTAL PUBLISHERS & DISTRIBUTORS, LTD.
8 La Belle Sauvage, Ludgate Hill, London, E.C., 4
Paris: HACHETTE & CIE, 111 Rue Reaumur

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Published monthly. Single copy 15 cents. By the year, \$1.50 in United States, its dependencies, Mexico and Cuba; Canada, \$1.75. Other countries, \$2.25. Currency should not be sent unless registered. Remittances should be made by check, express money order or postal money order. Copyrighted in Great Britain. Printed in U. S. A.

The World in the Balance

By J. P. MARSHALL

From Saturn they came, and gave the world a three-day ultimatum

UPPER BROADWAY drowsed lazily through the heat of the July afternoon. A policeman, taking advantage of a momentary lull in the rush of traffic, paused to mop his forehead and scan the blue sky above him.

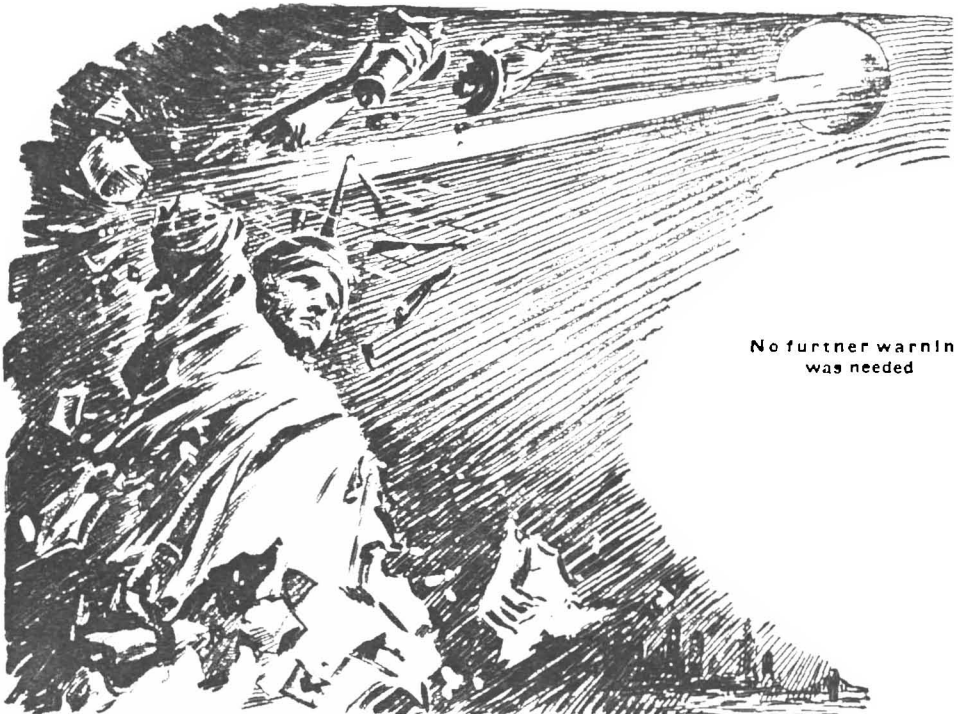
High up over the roofs of the buildings floated a toy balloon, its bright green color plainly seen even at that height. The officer grinned as he speculated over the mental anguish of the child who must have lost it.

The whirl of traffic closed in again, and for two hours the officer guided cars and pedestrians. Then came another break, and as before he brushed his handkerchief across his forehead and scanned the heavens.

Two hours! And yet the balloon was still there, holding the same relative position, except that it was nearer, bigger, out of all proportion to the size of the ordinary toy type. The officer let several cars pass unheeded while he tried to discover how a balloon could float freely and still beat up against the wind, for certainly it was moving toward him in spite of the breeze at his back.

The officer was not the only person in New York who was puzzled by the actions of the green sphere. From all parts of the city people watched, wondering what sort of an advertising project they were witnessing.

Evening came on, and still that gayly colored globe hung over the city, motion-



No further warning
was needed

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less now. Night—and it stood outlined against the sky like a phosphorescent moon, lighted by some sort of shifting fitful flame that seemed to come from within and swirl up over its surface.

From the harbor a brilliant pencil of light shot out, circled around and then up, coming to rest on the strange object. Then New York fairly rubbed its eyes!

It was gone! The beam from the searchlight swept here and there, trying to point it out again, but to no avail.

Suddenly from far above came an answering beam; a thin thread-like stream of green. In eerie fashion the beam shortened and lengthened, swept around in a wide arc, and then pointed straight down at the figure of Liberty.

A slight greenish glow surrounded the upper part of the statue.

The harbor searchlight circled to bear on the figure, and the watchers gasped. Liberty was broken! The entire head and half the torso had disappeared, the remaining part standing there with the searchlight playing up and down its shortened length.

There had been no noise, no crash.

Half the Statue of Liberty had simply vanished.

Up to that point curiosity had held the city in its grip. Now fear took its place.

Telephone and telegraph lines hummed with the news of the vandalism. And out over the harbor that phosphorescent globe suddenly became visible again.

An hour—two hours passed. From Mineola two huge armored bombers took off into the air and winged toward the scene of the disturbance. By the noise of the motors and the flare of the exhausts the populace followed the flight of the airplanes over the city, out over the harbor, straight toward that shining globe.

The bombers cut a wide circle around their objective; and then the roar of the motors became interspersed with the rattle of machine gun fire.

The globe moved; dropped swiftly until it rode just over the crests of the waves, then shot straight up with bewildering



The green globe rose high over the harbor and the city held its breath

speed. From the bottom of the craft crept a short green ray that grew and lengthened, whipping here and there until it found its mark.

The same greenish glow that had surrounded the statue enveloped one of the bombers. Its motor became silent.

It was gone! The other gave a final burst from its machine gun and fled.

The globe did not pursue; there was no need. That green ray flashed around toward the machine, hesitated, came to rest and then lengthened. Its tip touched the airplane, and like its mate it vanished, with that same greenish haze as the only sign of its passing!

THE sun rose over a disorganized city. People half-heartedly started toward their work. Some of the more hardy souls carried on as before, but the great majority were held by the fear of the unknown.

The happenings of the previous night seemed like some fantastic nightmare visited on the entire populace. But there in the harbor stood the wrecked body of Liberty as a grim reminder of the reality of things, and above, so high as to be just visible, rested that green agent of destruction.

At noon it began to grow larger as it

descended. Straight as a falling stone it fell toward the heart of the city, checked its rush just over the tops of the skyscrapers, then floated down to rest in the center of Times Square.

In appearance the object was a wonderfully smooth green sphere about a hundred and fifty feet in diameter, with no apparent opening of any kind.

For an hour it rested there, motionless, while the crowds gathered and the traffic of the city became paralyzed. Squad after squad of police arrived to form a circle around the sphere. Four machine gun crews hastily set up their weapons to command it from any point; and still nothing happened.

One officer, bolder or more foolhardy than the rest, slowly approached the bulky object. Foot by foot he cut down the intervening distance until he stood only an arm's length away.

He reached out a hand, touched it gingerly and hastily backed away several steps. Gaining courage he approached again and drummed lustily on the smooth surface with his club.

The sphere gave out a hollow metallic ring, that was all. Again he reached out a hand to touch the hammered surface; and as his fingers met it he promptly turned a back somersault.

The bewildered expression on his face as he scrambled to his feet would have been ludicrous at any other time. Now it was anything but funny to the watching crowds.

"It's charged," he yelled. "Electricity! My arm is numb!"

A sharp clang came from the interior of the sphere as a small section slid away, leaving an opening framing a hideous face when viewed from earthly standards. Another clang, and another section opened, leaving a space large enough for the creature's body to emerge.

Short of stature, and powerful of physique, with that ugly head surmounting the body, the stranger was far from prepossessing in appearance.

He beckoned to the stunned officer, and

that person, as if hypnotized, drew toward him with lagging feet.

The strange one uttered several guttural sounds and raised his brows as if in question. The officer shook his head. The other whipped out a pad and stylus, scratched rapidly and handed the result to the officer. Again the latter shook his head.

Impatiently the stranger beckoned him closer, and reaching out placed a huge powerful hand over the officer's temples, while he gazed steadily into his eyes. The policeman gave a yelp of astonishment and turned to his fellow officers.

"He says he wants to see the commander of this planet!" he gasped.

"Commander of the planet? There isn't any!"

The officer looked helplessly at the stranger, at a loss to know how to convey the information. The other solved his problem by placing one of the officer's hands over each of his own temples and again looking him in the eyes.

The officer was intelligent. Weird as it seemed, he realized that the other had the power to communicate by telepathy.

He gazed back steadily at his questioner and concentrated on the words of his answer. The stranger showed surprise and raised his hands again.

"He wants the ruler of the country then," announced the officer.

"He'll have to go to Washington."

The last answer being relayed, the stranger showed signs of impatience again.

"He says he wants to see someone in authority!"

The police commissioner stepped forward.

"I'll talk to him," he answered.

For half an hour the commissioner and the strange visitor carried on a silent conversation. Suddenly the stranger raised his hand with an unmistakable gesture of finality, and turning about, stepped back into his sphere.

A moment he stood there, then the section clanged back into place and the globe lifted. As if in a trance, the commissioner stood watching, his face drawn with the

horror of some knowledge he had just gained. The spell broke; the commissioner spun on his heel and barked a command:

"Quick! The machine guns! Don't let him get away."

The four guns rose and spat their leaden hail against the surface of the sphere. That terrible green ray, visible even in bright sunlight suddenly shone from a small aperture near the bottom.

The gunners were doomed, and they knew it. With blanched faces they stuck to their weapons and rained bullets at the rising craft.

The globe turned slowly, the ray swinging with it. A flare of green struck a gun squad and passed on. Machine gun, crew—all disintegrated before the eyes of the crowd. Even the pavement below was badly scarred.

In the center of the spot where the gun crew had been were only several small shining objects.

Unmindful of his own danger, the commissioner leaped to the spot and fell on his knees.

"By the Eternal!" he muttered again, as he picked up the glittering objects. There were two gold watches; one, an open-faced model, was merely an empty case, the other, a hunting-case type, was unharmed.

Near the watches were two gold rings; the first a wedding ring, the second a diamond setting from which the stone had vanished.

The commissioner's voice was hoarse with concentrated hate and horror. "If I live," he exclaimed, "I will make you pay for the murder of these boys!"

He shook his fist at the fast ascending globe, and ran for his car.

A SOLEMN-FACED group of men sat around the table in the commissioner's office the following afternoon.

Next to the commissioner was a stern-looking naval commander, in charge of the dreadnaught in the harbor. Beside the commander sat a small elderly man, the country's greatest astronomer.

Across from the latter, drumming his fingers nervously on the polished table top, was a younger man, his keen eyes darting from one to another of the group. He was a scientist, one of those men to whom civilization owes its greatest progress.

A major, commanding the available land forces, completed the group.

The fleet was away, but steaming at full speed for New York. The military forces of the nation were being entrained from all points toward the city. But it was all useless, and those around the table knew it.

"Tell us, commissioner"—the major tugged at his mustache thoughtfully—"tell us, please, just what passed in that mental conversation."

"We have three days!" The commissioner's voice was dull with the agony of despair. "He gave us three days to surrender the entire country. Saturday he will come again, to Times Square, and we must meet him and tell him our decision.

"What can we do? How can we fight such an enemy? That devilish globe will simply hang up there out of range, loose that ray, and wipe us out! It can conquer the world. Its commander knows it. We know it! And yet—to give up without a blow—"

"You, major, and you, commander, you are the professional fighting men. What do you say?"

The major met the glance of the commander, and both winced. They knew their limitations, yet each was prepared to take up the hopeless fight. The major spoke:

"We hold the fate of the world in our hands, gentlemen. It is not America alone, it is the world! Washington has instructed us to hold out as best we can until other forces arrive, but Washington does not know—One must have been here to realize the terror of the thing.

"Heaven knows how many warriors that globe carries, what other weapons it conceals. It must be prevented from landing here, but how? Commissioner"—a sudden thought seemed to strike the major—"did you find out where it came from?"

"I asked. The stranger answered with some name that was meaningless to me, but into my mind flashed a picture of a globe whirling in space, while around it spun an outer ring like this." The commissioner grasped a pencil and sketched his thought.

The astronomer reached over and pulled the sheet toward him.

"A globe—an outer ring. It must be Saturn! But we always supposed that it was unlivable for humans!"

"We have the proof! Here! Now!"

"What a chance!" The astronomer was thinking aloud. "What a chance! If we could but capture the thing with its crew alive. The things they could tell—" His eyes were dreamy, his mind far away, wandering through the solar system; the scientist always seeking knowledge.

"No!" It was the naval commander who spoke. "We cannot risk it. Destroy the thing. We must bend all our efforts to that result. We cannot, must not risk the chance of its escape. We must destroy it now!"

"Yes." The scientist nodded. "Destroy it! I can quite understand the professor's feeling. If we merely succeed in driving it away, what then? It would return to its planet and bring others next time. Beyond a doubt the craft is experimental in its nature. If it returns, others will follow. If it is destroyed the others will not come because of its supposed failure. It may be years before another attempt will be made, and in that time we will have been able to prepare for such a possibility. The question is: How are we to destroy this present menace?"

"Mine the Square." The major offered the suggestion with almost an air of apology. "Mine the whole of Times Square, and when it lands—"

"No." The scientist shook his head. "They will be wary. They have an intelligence of a higher degree than ours. It may hurt to admit it, but we must deal with facts. They will not blunder into a trap. What can you offer, commander?"

The commander shook his head.

"I can only stand to my guns," he an-

swered, snapping his jaws together. "It is hopeless, but I cannot surrender. When it comes I shall open fire with the ship's anti-aircraft guns—and pray."

"You, commissioner?" The scientist had quite easily assumed command. "What do you propose?"

The commissioner opened his lips to speak, and shook his head.

"I tried before," he almost whispered, "and you know the result."

"Then listen to me." The scientist leaned forward, his eyes snapping, his words crackling through the room like electric sparks. "You have all admitted your inability to contend with the enemy. Guns, ships, men, everything is useless! Everything withers before that baleful ray except one thing—and there lies our defense, and our weapon!"

He leaned over and picked up the watch cases and rings that the commissioner had brought from the scene of the tragedy of the previous day.

"Are you mad? Several bits of damaged jewelry to fight with!" The major glared accusingly at the scientist. "You cannot be making sport at such a time."

"No. Here." The scientist leaned forward again. "See this case? It was open faced, and the ray destroyed the works. This other watch has a hunting case, and it is unharmed. The ray does not consume gold, nor material that is protected by a gold covering. Listen, and then tell me if I am mad!"

HALF an hour later the five men sat leaning back in their chairs. Eyes that had been dull with the knowledge of defeat were now bright with the hope of victory.

"Hurry." The scientist turned to the commissioner. "You have the men trained for the work. Send them out. Tell them to bring every metalsmith they can find, even if they have to carry them. Take over the jewelers' factories; they have the machinery and the tools. Gather gold, gold, gold—from anywhere and everywhere. Do not stop to bargain. Confiscate

in the name of the government. You have force; if the need comes use it! And in the museum you will find models—get them.”

All that night, through all of Thursday and all of Friday, the jewelers' shops hummed with activity. Near midnight of Friday the whine of machinery began to decrease; by two o'clock Saturday morning the last shop became dark and silent.

Trucks sped to police headquarters carrying the handiwork of the metal-smiths: twenty-five shining suits of armor of pure beaten gold, twenty-five ridiculous little round gold shields, their face burnished so that they shone and sparkled with each little bit of light that touched them.

The scientist viewed the collection.

“It is all we can do.” He turned to the commissioner. “Camouflage the suits with black paint. There is no need to show our enemy the nature of our defense. Pick me twenty-four men who aren't afraid to die, and send them to me. I am going to wear one suit myself.”

“Twenty-three,” the commissioner replied quietly. “I need pick only twenty-three. One suit is for me. I am thinking of those dead gunners of mine.”

“As you will,” the scientist nodded. “If we fail, it will not matter much which of us are among the living and which are dead!”

SATURDAY dawned clear, with the whole populace watching the sky. News was abroad! The green globe had been seen in Europe, Asia, all over the world, and at each place of call it had left the same trail of destruction and the same ultimatum: three days to surrender!

This was to be the day of America's answer—and the whole world was watching, waiting for the news that would mean victory and safety, or defeat and chaos.

At ten o'clock the globe appeared, looking no bigger than a marble when first sighted. Down it drifted until it hung fairly low over the harbor, less than two miles up.

From the ground a flock of airplanes sprang, and swiftly form into battle formation and speed toward the enemy.

The air battle was soon over. The machine guns on the planes had hardly become warm before the green ray appeared, at first only one, then as the planes drew nearer the whole globe fairly bristled with rays darting here and there in every direction.

Before that deadly barrage of light the planes disappeared. One after another they dropped from existence until but a scant half dozen were left. These last turned and streaked back toward the landing field, beaten.

Behind them the rays lengthened and sped to catch up with them. There were four—two—one! The lone survivor circled, dipped, and straightened out for the landing; but the wheels never touched the ground. Less than a hundred feet up it became—nothing!

A series of heavy reports from the harbor marked the entry into the fray of the anti-aircraft guns on the dreadnaught. The globe shot straight up so swiftly that the watchers' necks all jerked back in unison in an attempt to follow that flight. Safely out of range, the globe floated quietly again.

A bundle of green threads grew down toward the dreadnaught. Standing on the bridge, the commander saw, and knew his fate.

“Cease firing! Overboard! Every man jack that can get over—go!”

The order was passed along, and the surface of the harbor became dotted with bobbing heads.

Alone on the bridge, the commander gripped the rail until the knuckles of his hands stood out white. His upturned eyes followed the approach of the rays. The enemy was slow, maliciously letting the victims taste the full dregs of death. At last they struck!

The huge dreadnaught melted from sight instantly. A rushing, whirling maelstrom grew on the spot as the surrounding waves rushed in to fill up the gap left by

the disintegrating waters. And the commander had gone down with his ship.

In a side street off Times Square twenty-five heavily moving men stirred uneasily. The golden armor bore down on them, and the strain of waiting was beginning to wear on taut nerves.

Fortunately for their peace of mind, they had been unable to see the drama that had been enacted in and over the harbor, but they had no illusions concerning their own part that was yet to be played. They knew that it would be either victory or death.

The globe descended again, circled the city, and stopped high up over the square.

"Scatter!" The scientist gave his gold-muffled order. "Circle the square and come out when you hear the siren. You know your stations; you know what you have to do. Remember, on our success or failure hangs the fate of the nation, and it may well be the fate of the world."

He spoke to the men within the gold-armored truck that carried the huge siren:

"Watch me, and when I raise my arm sound the signal."

The globe dropped slowly, warily, suspecting a possible trap. A volley of rays reached down to the square and its environs.

The pavement in the center of the square vanished, leaving a huge shallow crater. The scientist was right; it would have been useless to mine the square. The tall, proud structure of the Times Building disappeared, the Paramount and others followed one by one, until in the center of New York there was a huge circle of barrenness, with only a light green haze drifting across the space where Times Square had been.

Nearer dropped the globe, and again it stopped, barely a hundred feet up.

The scientist raised his arm. The huge siren screeched out its signal, the sound echoing back and forth from the walls of the buildings yet standing.

The men of the gold armor appeared, walking slowly, heavily over the edge of the crater, each swinging his burnished shield. Slowly they drew toward each other until they had formed a rough circle about three hundred feet across.

The globe hung quietly, then, as if in question, a slim green ray crept down and touched one of the armored men. As by magic, the black paint covering the armor disappeared, leaving a brilliant golden figure standing out in the full afternoon light.

The globe shot up a few hundred feet, hesitated, then drifted down to its former level. Twenty-five rays gleamed out from its polished surface; the entire band of armored men suddenly shone as had the first.

The scientist waved his arm and swung his shield before him. The others followed suit. Again following his lead, they all faced their shields upward. Those green rays, impotently playing over the golden figures, were caught on the polished surfaces of the shields. A moment of wavering, and then the reflected rays shot back toward their projector. Too late the commander of that weird craft must have realized the meaning of those shields—golden mirrors, each sending back at him the terrible ray of death that was his own weapon.

Like a toy balloon drawn over a gas flame, the globe itself disintegrated. A ball of greenish mist hung motionless overhead—then only the clear blue of the sky could be seen.

In the center of the square two golden figures clasped each other clumsily and attempted to shake hands.

"Thank Heaven, we've won!" The scientist jerked up his gold visor and peered at the commissioner.

"Yes." The commissioner's reply was blurred by a choking sob. "America—the world—is safe. And those dead heroes—they will rest happily now!"