



# THRILLING ADVENTURES

Vol. XII, No. 2

J. S. WILLIAMS, Editor

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# World

*Captured by Mysterious Denizens of an Asteroid, Ralph Owens and Jack Clark Are Pitted Against the Mighty Power of Weird Forces of Destruction!*

## *A Novelette of the Future*

By RAY CUMMINGS

*Author of "The Girl in the Golden Atom," etc.*

### CHAPTER I

*"The Earth Is Menaced!"*

"I SENT for you, Jack," Professor Owen said, "because I think that the earth is menaced."

Jack Clark, reporter of the *American Press*, started across the pro-

fessor's dim, shadowy library. Owen was leaning forward in his chair intently, his thin face drawn.

"What do you mean by that?" Clark demanded.

"I mean a menace from space. I think that—last night—weird beings from another world landed upon earth. I have a statement to make



# of Doom



*The little tentacle arms flailed; the bent and useless little legs kicked against Clark in abject terror*

to the press—scientific facts to back it.”

The aged Professor Owen's voice became solemn, and more grim than ever.

“This attack—if it should come, Jack, it could devastate the earth.”

It sent a shiver through Clark to

hear a calm, precise man of science make such a statement. Weird beings from another planet attacking the earth! He shuddered at the gruesome thought.

It was midnight—the night of August 10th. Clark had received an urgent summons to Professor Owen's home on a mountain-top in New Hampshire. He had come by plane—the professor's private landing field was beside the house, lighted with floodlights now. And nearby was the dome of his private astronomical observatory.

“I don't understand—” Clark began.

Ralph Owen, the professor's son, spoke earnestly.

“We'll explain quickly enough. This asteroid thing—”

Young Owen and Clark had been good friends in college. Owen was

plainly under stress now, grim as his father.

"I'll explain it to him, Ralph," the professor interjected.

He turned to Clark. "You know, Jack, that some three months ago an incoming asteroid was discovered, out near the orbit of Jupiter?"

"Yes, I know that."

"A dark little world. It has, we think, a diameter of about two hundred miles—a circumference of some six hundred. It's been coming in toward our sun, on an elliptical orbit like a comet. It probably will round the sun, like a comet, and go out again."

"And it's passing the earth now," Clark nodded. "I've read all about that."

"Exactly," the professor agreed. "It's too small to affect us in any way—and it's moving too swiftly for the earth to draw it to us. Tonight, it is some five hundred thousand miles away, at about its closest point. That's pretty close, astronomically speaking. Only about twice the distance of our moon."

"Ever seen it?" Ralph Owen asked Clark.

"No. But I read that, to the naked eye—"

"Come here, I'll show you."

THEY stood at the French windows. To one side of the dark and silent grove of trees, a big patch of purple-velvet, star-strewn sky was visible. The stars were clear and sparkling, here at this altitude.

"Out there," young Owen indicated, "midway from the top of that left-hand tree to the zenith—"

Clark could hardly be sure that he identified it. Certainly it looked harmless enough—a little pin-point of blazing light—just one of the myriad of smaller stars. But they were all blazing suns, thousands of light-years away, and this asteroid was very small and very close. Dark

and cold—like our earth, and Venus and Mars and the moon. No light of its own. Shining only by reflected sunlight.

They sat down again.

"The public isn't very interested, of course," the professor continued. "But, Jack, that little world has an atmosphere. Air envelopes it, like our earth. The surface can't be seen because the clouds hang too thickly."

"Until tonight, Father," young Owen said—and Clark heard a strained hush to his voice.

"Yes, until tonight," the professor repeated heavily. "I was at my telescope. It's small, compared to the big observatories, but adequate for this job."

CLARK knew about the professor's telescope. It was of a new type, an electro-telescope. Small of lens, it yet had remarkable power. Its electronic current sent from its barrel a narrow jet of violet radiance into the sky. That small violet beam was visible now, slanting upward from the observatory dome toward the asteroid. Clark had noticed it a moment ago when they were at the window.

"As I was at my telescope tonight," the professor said, "there suddenly was a rift in the clouds around this asteroid. I saw down to the surface. I saw small metallic mountains—but there was vegetation growing. Signs of water. Ice melting, because now the little world has come into our sun's warmth. It is warming up from what must have been a devastating cold. I saw all the necessities of human life—"

"And life itself," young Owen exclaimed. "Things moving—"

"Just a brief glimpse," the professor added, "and then the clouds closed in again. But I saw what I think is human life."

Interesting! But what could be



*A leafy python wrapped around him, squeezing, writhing like a living antagonist*

so frightening in this? It seemed that Owen interpreted Clark's thoughts, for he said:

"Frightening, Jack, because last night Father thought he saw something approaching our earth. I mean really close—just above our atmosphere. Fifty miles away, maybe. A tiny, swift-moving blob. It crossed the field of the telescope so fast that he barely saw it—and he could never pick it up again. But it could have been an interplanetary vehicle."

Owen's words were tumbling over one another with a swift vehemence.

"Something coming down from the direction of this asteroid, to land upon our earth. It could have been that. And last night there was a small news item in the papers—naturally, you probably didn't notice it. A farmer and his family near here were all found dead. Little burned black patches on them—as though they had been struck by lightning.

"As a matter of fact, there was an electrical storm near dawn. But that probably was just a coincidence. They were all indoors, and the house wasn't struck. And Father thinks—"

"I think," the professor said slowly "that I actually did see an interplanetary vehicle about to land on the earth. The beginning of an attack from this asteroid. Weird beings—God knows what they can be like—things intelligent—perhaps more intelligent than we are—perhaps not even in human form."

IT turned Clark cold. He was a big fellow, this Jack Clark, blond as a Viking, afraid of no man. But things inhuman—a quiet man of science saying things like this! The shadowed library here suddenly, to his startled imagination, lurked with menace. These opened French windows—that shadow over there by the piano—

He felt a cold sweat starting from every pore. He shook himself to free his mind of those crazy thoughts.

"But look here—" he objected.

He got no further. Vague fears leaped suddenly into realized ones. The silent house rang with a woman's scream of terror.

Clark and his two companions leaped to their feet.

"Good Lord, that's Annie, our cook!" young Owen ejaculated.

THE two young men found Annie in the kitchen. The young negress lay sprawled on the floor, dead. Unquestionably dead. But killed—how? Not stabbed, or shot. There was no wound upon her. No sign of violence.

"Look!" Owen yelled suddenly. "Look, here on her arm!"

Stark terror was in his voice. The white sleeve of the girl's waist was ripped; and blackened, charred! The flesh of her arm had a little burned spot—like one who has been struck by lightning. Clark's mind swept back—that farmer and his family—they had been found dead like this, last night.

The menace from the asteroid! Weird beings, perhaps not even in human form. They must be here—now!

They had been bending down over the dead girl. Clark sprang to his feet.

"These—confounded things from space—here? They must have been here, Ralph. Just a minute ago."

And suddenly they thought of Professor Owen. The old man hadn't followed them in their rush here. It was a hot night. The kitchen door and windows were open; the serene starlit night brooded outside. Clark started toward the door, then turned.

"Got to get back to your father," he jerked.

They ran. On the floor of the shadowed living room, the blackened body of Professor Owen lay there crumpled. Dead!

Clark's brain whirled. These enemies—were they invisible? There was nothing here. The room with its opened French windows seemed empty. But was it?

Owen stood stricken, gazing down at his father, forgetful of everything in the face of this terrible, unexpected tragedy. Clark shook him.

"Got to do something, Ralph. Death here—to us also."

The living must fight, not stand helplessly mourning the dead. Owen suddenly snapped out of his trance, his pale face contorted, his dark eyes blazing with the desire for vengeance. Both he and Clark were unarmed. On the table was a heavy bookend and Clark seized it for a weapon. Owen, still confused, stood with clenched fists.

Was there a rustling in the room? Clark thought so. No, it was outside the French window. He ran to the window, leaped upon the window box, and with a bound landed outside on the grass. Owen was directly behind him.

Nothing out here. In the starlight, with the dark shadowed grove of trees close at hand, they stood peering.

Nothing here?

**T**HEN Clark saw the accursed things. With a chill running like ice through his veins, he stood stiffened, gripping his companion—both of them staring, wordlessly, almost paralyzed with disbelief.

Under the trees, things were moving. The patterns of starlight showed them, upright brown things, with legs short and squat. Travesties of humans, with heads, and waving arms. Things some four feet tall. The eyes of them showed

as moving green points of fire in the darkness.

"Why—why—look—" Owen muttered.

Close at hand there was a rustle. In the starlight of the open lawn, not ten feet away, one of the squat brown things stood upon its jointed legs, its multiple arms waving like tentacles. Insect? Human? The shell-like jointed body was garbed with clothes. Weapons dangled from a belt.

The thing stood with a single eye gleaming balefully from its travesty of a face. And then it leaped forward upon the two men!

## CHAPTER II

### *Forty Million Miles*

**C**LARK flung the bookend, but it went wide of its mark. The attacking brown shape struck against him. It was light in weight and he hardly staggered. But brown tentacle arms enveloped him. A huge pincer gripped his shoulder; it cut through his leather jacket, squeezing, pinching his flesh.

A leering face, with a wide, slit-like mouth in a gaping crescent, stared up from the height of his chest. The goggling round single eye gleamed with a green phosphorescence.

Instant impressions. Clark struck with his fist into the gruesome face. His fist sank deep as it cracked like an eggshell. He felt, on his fist and wrist and part way up his forearm, a horrible gluey, sticky ooze. The thing screamed—an eerie cry, half animal, half human. Its gripping pincer loosened; the enveloping tentacles fell away so that Clark jerked his fist from the ooze and staggered back, free of it. The wounded thing sank to the ground, writhing.

But others were here. A ring of them now, surging forward, closing in. The stench of the broken thing

at Clark's feet was nauseating. At a little distance, on the ground, he saw Owen rolling with a brown cluster of the things upon him, a mass of tangled bodies and threshing tentacles. One of the brown shells crushed under the weight of Owen's heaving body. Owen was a small fellow, but he was lithe as a cat. He was fighting like a cat now.

The ring around Clark was closing in. It seemed, in the dim starlight, to be a ring of phosphorescent eyes. He saw waving weapons; scientific devices, undoubtedly. But none of them were being used.

Thoughts are instant things. The impression came to Clark in that second while he stood there panting, glaring at his antagonists, that these strange beings wanted to capture him alive. Then a tiny bolt flashed, like an updarting, inverted flash of lightning. It spat high, went up through the tree branches. A warning bolt, to show him what could be done.

The brown things around him were standing inactive now. But Owen, on the ground, was still fighting. He shouted:

"Jack! They're flimsy. Smash them! I can—" His voice went off into a gurgle. Clark swung and leaped toward the struggling group.

"Stop it, Ralph! Don't fight—they'll kill—"

**W**ITH a rustling surge, the brown things came at him. They swarmed over him. His flailing fists cracked them in a tumult of horror. He waded through the broken, oozing bodies, flung them off, but others came. Fearless things. The death of one had no effect upon the others. The starlit grove rang with their blood-curdling screams.

Then it seemed that from the pincer-hand of one of them, a metal cylinder was squirting fumes into Clark's face. The smell was heavy,

sickeningly sweet. He held his breath. He caught the cylinder, ripped it away, and crashed it through the face of the thing which had been wielding it.

But he had breathed the drug fumes. His legs and arms suddenly felt heavy. His head was roaring; he felt his body bathed in a sudden outpouring of sweat. He was still fighting—but abruptly it seemed like a dream. He saw Owen's inert body being carried away under the trees by a staggering group of the brown creatures.

**W**AS this the end? As though in a nightmare, Clark tried to keep on fighting, despite his fading senses. Then the starlit vision of the tentacles around him deepened into blackness. He felt himself falling. The roaring in his head grew into a great torrent of sound, enveloping all the world. Then it, too, faded, as all his senses slid away into a black and soundless abyss of unconsciousness.

\* \* \* \* \*

Clark recovered his senses to find himself lying on a metal grid-floor. Owen was sitting beside him, bending over him.

"Oh—you're all right now. Thank God for that!"

"Yes. All right. I guess so." With returning strength, he struggled to sit up. "Where—where are we?"

They were on a space-flyer, quite evidently. In a small and dark, cell-like room. Neither of them was greatly injured. They had been drugged and now it was wearing off.

They were alone in the room. A few pieces of strangely fashioned furniture were here. There was a metal door-slide but it was locked; Owen had already investigated that. In one wall, opposite the door, was an oval bull's-eye pane. Brilliant starlight was streaming in. It was the only light in the room.



"We're in space," Owen muttered. "Heading for that confounded asteroid. Come here, I'll show you." He gestured toward the window.

Dizzily Clark gained his feet. He was horribly weak, his head still heavy and whirling.

"I was knocked out, like you," Owen tried to reconstruct events. "But I came to—Lord, it seems hours ago. A day maybe. Nobody has been here. But we're moving through space, all right."

The room was vibrationless. There was no sense of moving, but a distant hum and throb were audible. The vehicle's mechanisms were in operation.

The sight from the window was amazing. Freed of earth's hampering atmosphere, the stars shone with an amazing blue-white brilliance, against a firmament dead-black. Ilimitable distance stretched here. Black infinity of space, star-filled. The stars were everywhere—overhead, and to the sides, and underneath.

"I figure we must be near the stern of this ship," Owen said. "The sun must be forward. We're heading toward it. You can't see it from here. I figure that's the earth there."

He pointed.

**T**HE earth! Of course it was. A reddish-silver disc, level with the window. Clark had his wits now, and he was puzzled. The earth, off there, was visually no more than the size of our moon. And there was the moon itself, a tiny light-point, hanging near the earth-disc.

"But, good Lord!" Clark expostulated, "how did we get so far away, just while we've been unconscious? For the earth to be that small, we must have gone a great many million miles. The asteroid was only half a million. Where the devil are we heading? Where is the asteroid?"

"Darned if I know," Owen scowled. "But I can guess. Say, aren't you pretty hungry?"

Thinking of it, Clark was. And thirsty. And very strangely weak.

"My guess is that the drug we breathed threw us into catalepsy," Owen said. "Suspended animation, out of which we've just recovered today."

"Today?" Clark gasped.

"Sure. Today. I think we've been unconscious a week of earth time. Maybe longer."

**I**T was true. The asteroid had been passing the earth the night they were abducted. It was only five hundred thousand miles away, but by the laws of celestial mechanics, every instant its velocity was accelerating. The space vehicle was chasing after it now, and taking days to catch it. Already the vehicle had crossed the orbit of Venus, and was well in toward the orbit of Mercury.

The two men had been at the window perhaps five minutes when there was a noise behind them. They swung, tense, alert, to see the door-slide moving. In the dim aperture, a squat brown thing stood peering. With an outstretched tentacle-arm holding the partly opened door-slide, it gazed in at the two prisoners. And they stared back at it.

Clark saw it suddenly not as an insect, but as a human. A travesty of a man. Jointed legs, short and bent; with a garment of grey fabric draped across the hips and up over the shoulders. Four tentacle arms. A body, with bulging chest. A neck, thin and spindly, supporting a round head. A face, with a single eye over the nose, and a slit of mouth beneath. And flapping ears at the sides.

But still it seemed human. The voice mumbled words in a strange tongue. It was harsh and guttural;

but there was intelligence in the sound.

Then the man—Clark could think of it as a man now—came slowly into the room. One of his hands—not a pincer on this arm, but flexible fingers—fumbled at his belt.

Clark said tensely:

"If you understand English—don't try to kill us. We don't want to fight."

The English words evidently were unintelligible. But the hand came from the belt and proffered a small cylinder of red-brown polished metal.

And Clark relaxed.

"Good Lord, Ralph," he said, "I guess it's something to eat or drink."

He took the cylinder, shook it; a liquid swished inside. At the door now, others of the little brown-shelled men were standing. They held weapons in their hands—small projectors of metal. But they were all smiling, the slits of mouth upturned into the mockery of a grin. And the one in the room made a gesture of drinking.

"Thanks," said Clark. He put the open end of the cylinder to his mouth, and drank a heavy sweetish liquid. But it was refreshing, queerly strengthening. Almost at once the weakness he had felt left him; his normal strength came quickly back. An elixir.

A cylinder of it was given Owen. Then food was brought.

**A** DAY passed—then another. Days of accustomed earth time, to be measured now only by hunger intervals, and times when Jack and Ralph went to sleep. Except when one of their captors brought food, the men were left alone. Two mattresses were given them to lie on—fabric coverings stuffed with something soft, redolent as incense. And the shining round disc of the earth dwindled steadily in visual size.

Another meal. They tried to cal-

culate how far they might be from earth now. Forty million miles, perhaps. They were discussing it when abruptly the silent interior of the vehicle sounded with voices and the scratching tread of men.

The door-slide opened. The man who had been bringing in their food and drink signed for them to come out. They were accustomed to his gestures now, and followed him docilely along a narrow vaulted metal corridor into a larger room which was in the bow of the vessel.

**A** GROUP of the weird-looking little men was here. Through every contact with their captors now, the two young prisoners were increasingly aware of the little brown creatures' human aspect, for all their weird appearance. And an ironical thought struck Clark so forcibly now that he laughed aloud.

"Heavens, Ralph—we look as queer to them as they look to us!"

It was true enough. The group here in this long narrow apartment—it seemed the control-room of the vessel—crowded forward to see the huge, strange earthmen. They plucked at them, felt their strange solidity of bone and muscle, meanwhile jabbering with guttural rapidity. And their stares were composed of awe and fear. Truly, to them these strange giants were things to be afraid of, and to watch closely.

Clark saw that he and his companion were certainly being carefully watched. Several of the men, with projector weapons held alert, were always close beside the captives. Beyond that, after the first few moments, the earthmen were ignored.

Brilliant light was streaming in one of the left-hand windows. Gigantic sun now. Huge ball, leaping and crawling with color. The flames of the corona—monstrous tongues of fire—licked outward into space. And



the asteroid was here, close in advance of the ship's bow.

It showed as a titanic half-moon, dark on one side, painted with sunlight on the other. Huge, unreal, it stretched half across the visual firmament. Even to the naked eye now, its heavy dark cloud masses were visible.

Hours passed. A meal of the strange food to which they were growing accustomed was served the prisoners. Swiftly the asteroid grew in visual size. Presently it stretched and blocked all the forward hemisphere of space. Its clouds held solid. Then the clouds and all the starry heavens swung in an arc, as the vessel altered its course. To Clark came a new viewpoint.

The tumbling vapor-masses of the asteroid's atmosphere were under the space-ship now. The ship was dropping down into the clouds. Then it was in them. A solid grey fog, luminous with radiating sunlight, enveloped all the bull's-eye windows.

There followed an hour's descent, with the men at the controls watchfully regarding their banks of dials and indicators. An air of excitement now was upon all the little men. Soon they would land, triumphantly bringing home the captive giants whom undoubtedly they had been sent to earth to secure.

**JACK'S** mind swept back to that night in Professor Owen's mountain-top home. It seemed so long ago. He realized now that this vehicle had been attracted by the violet beam of the telescope, whose penetrating radiance had streamed into space. And the floodlights of the landing field had brilliantly illumined the house and its vicinity.

The bull's-eye windows in the floor of the room here had suddenly brightened. The ship had come down through the clouds, into a grey, flat twilight.

The new world! It lay spread beneath them, weird, strange, bizarre beyond anything they had ever imagined.

### CHAPTER III

#### *The Brain in the Chair*

**F**ORGETFUL for the moment of their own situation, Clark and Owen peered down through the aperture at their feet. The ship was descending from what seemed now an altitude of no more than twenty thousand feet. Overhead, the sky was sullen with dark, misty clouds.

Below, the surface of this little world was visible—a tumbled region of grey-black mountains.

Desolate vista! Bleak naked crags. Spires and pinnacles of shining metallic rock, some of them smooth and burnished, gleaming with a dull sheen in the twilight.

The vehicle dropped lower. The convexity of the little world was clearly apparent. The horizon was close; the sharp curvature obvious. To one side, where a bank of little mountains rose in serrated ranks, what seemed water was visible.

It was a painfully barren landscape. And where were its people? None were visible here. Then Clark saw that the tumbled and scarred surface was pitted with cavernous openings. A honeycomb of grottoes, in which, undoubtedly, the people lived.

And then he saw things moving—blobs on the rocks.

A succession of new details. The two earthmen could hardly encompass them, so strange was it all, so swiftly changing as the space-ship dropped down. Against the horizon, to the right, a red glare showed, and rising smoke. A volcano? Now vegetation was apparent. Vines, low on the rocks. Little patches of soil, lying like water in the rock-hollows;

and in the soil, small, stunted trees, blue-white.

And then Clark saw that the vines were crawling on the rocks. Vegetation, swiftly growing with visible movement!

The twilight was fading. It was evidently late afternoon, in this little world with a day of only three earth hours. The night came swiftly; the scene plunged into sudden darkness. Weird world!

FROM the windows where now they could see only vague spots of moving light, the fascinated spectators were presently plucked by their captors. The ship was preparing to land. Clark and Owen were shoved back into the dim windowless corridor. Beside them stood their four little guards. Flimsy humans. Flimsy as huge insects.

"I could smash all of them with a blow," Owen murmured.

"But don't try it," Clark warned. "We can't kill every one on the ship. And everyone on the asteroid. What's more, we couldn't navigate the ship—even if we had control of it."

There was a thump as the vessel landed; grinding sounds as the heavy windows and door-slides were opened.

Air of the new world! Heavy air—heavy with strange smells. The guards shoved the two prisoners forward. Out of the ship. Down an incline.

To the pair it was a phantasmagoria of weird flickering lights—shadowed rocks—crowds of the small insect-men plucking at them, pushing them forward, staring awed at these giant beings from another world. And a chaos of sounds. Jabbering voices; cries of command; the scratching of insect-like feet.

They stumbled forward. A rocky ground was underfoot. Then they were in a cave—a tunnel, descending. It was dimly lighted with spots of

blue light placed at intervals along its ceiling. The jabbering voices echoed with a muffled roar.

"Queer that the gravity is almost like the earth," Owen said suddenly.

They felt almost normal. A little lighter, but not much. The density of this small asteroid was amazing. Of what metal the rock might have been, no one will ever say. But undoubtedly, it had an immense atomic weight.

The underground corridor broadened. As they passed a branch corridor, a group of the brown-shelled men, brandishing metallic fan-shaped swords, herded all the crowd into the diverging tunnel. There remained only the two captives and a dozen of their guards. Diffused light showed ahead—a dim radiance, blue-white.

They emerged at last into a fairly large underground apartment. It was queerly blue—the radiating blue light which came from a hidden source; a padded blue floor; walls and ceiling draped with blue fabrics. At first the two men could see very little. The blue radiance, though not intense, strangely dazzled them. They moved forward, shoved by their captors, who prodded them with the projector weapons.

THE apartment seemed empty, queerly silent. The jabber of the men had ceased; and the padded floor muffled their scratching tread. The room was some fifty feet long. At its end, on the floor, a few strangely fashioned chairs were placed. Beyond them was a raised platform—a padded dais some three feet high.

No one here? Clark's eyes were becoming more accustomed to the blue radiance now. With a sudden pounding of his heart, he saw a small, wide, padded armchair on the dais. In it, sitting motionless, was a man of this weird world. A man?

Clark's reason had to call the thing a man. Ruler of the asteroid? It seemed so.

The little insect-men, to whose gruesome aspect they had in a measure grown accustomed, shoved their captives to the foot of the dais. The earthmen they had been sent to get. They stood silent, expectant, as they brought the earth-giants for their ruler's inspection.

And Clark and Owen, with pounding hearts, stared at the man in the chair. He was just about level with them as they stood on the floor before the dais.

Owen gasped out a startled oath. Clark murmured an aside.

"Easy! Don't make a move. If we frighten them, they can kill us in a second."

The man in the chair had a head of perhaps twice normal earth size. A single-eyed face, with a slit of mouth. A spindly neck, upon which the huge head wobbled. His body was small as a five-year-old earth child—the bulging brown chest clothed and hung with metal ornaments like a profusion of medals, to dignify his high office.

He sat wobbling in the chair, his four tentacle arms gripping the chair sides to steady himself. His small jointed legs hung down, not touching the floor.

**A** MAN almost all head. And now as Clark stared, he saw that the huge hairless skull was transparent. Not bone. Not even a shell. A head of bloated membrane, bloated by the brain inside it. Transparent membrane. The huge brain within lay visible—palpitating, twisting like a tangle of worms.

The single eye was regarding the prisoners steadily. To Clark the silence became insupportable. He burst out impulsively:

"Do you speak? What do you want of us?"

In the hush, his voice burst out like a bomb. It startled the ruler in the chair. And the guards beside Clark leaped, seized him with their pincers. Their weapons came up, leveled at his head; and then as, for a tense moment, he did not move, the guards relaxed.

Owen expelled a long breath.

"Gosh, you tell me to be careful, Jack!" he murmured. "Don't do a think like that again. That head up there—"

**T**HE Master Brain! A gigantic intellect dominating this little world. Undoubtedly, it was that.

Then this ruler spoke softly in his own language to his men. One of them leaped lightly to the platform. And now Clark saw, on a rack up there, a row of what seemed to be large test-tubes. There were ten, with wires connecting them. The light shone on them as the guard carefully lifted them and hung them like a necklace around the spindly neck of the ruler in the chair. The connecting wires looped and fastened them; the tubes in front dangled on his bulging chest.

The light from over the dais shone more clearly on the test tubes now. Clark saw that they were filled with a grey, palpitating substance. Living brain tissue! Brain of this ruler which his bloated head could not contain, nurtured in the test-tubes!

A wire was placed now around his bloated, quivering forehead. The brains in the tubes were connected with the brain in his head, so that now he might use all his mentality in dealing with these strange prisoners.

Suddenly Clark saw that other wires from the necklace of brain tubes were tossed by the guards over the dais-front. A guard below picked them up. Two wires. A looped electrode was at the end of

each. And the guards were about to fasten them to the foreheads of the prisoners.

Owen winced. He muttered an oath of protest. But he was seized, menaced. He stood, belligerent, gazing wild-eyed at his tormentors.

Clark's senses whirled. Was this some weird form of electrocution? He felt the electrode touch his forehead. His whole instinct was to cast it off. To fight—to go down fighting.

But that was sure death. This might be something else. He stood stiff and tense, watching the wire fastened now around Owen's head. The young man was panting, his face pale, his fists clenched.

The electrode was cold on Clark's forehead. It snapped together with a click. The guard stood away.

The Brain in the chair had a hand on a switch lever. And slowly he pulled it.

#### CHAPTER IV

##### *The Attack on the Cave*

CLARK felt a sudden reeling of his senses. Every muscle in his body was taut, braced against the shock. On earth, in the electric chair, the condemned criminal doubtless is taut like that as he waits for the shock of dying.

But Clark felt only a wave of dizziness. The vision of the dais and the weird ruler in the chair reeled before him, but he was not dead. Not even harmed. He saw Owen standing, still wild-eyed—and then on his face, when he found he was still alive, an expression of wonderment and great relief.

A minute passed while neither of the prisoners dared move. Clark was aware of the hum of a current, vague, as though it were not audible to his ears, but sounding in his head. Everything was vague; and abruptly he was conscious that his thoughts were wandering. Dulled.

He fought to think clearly. But it seemed as though this current were sapping his mind, draining it, so that he was blunted, passively quiescent, almost stripped of his ability to think.

This current, draining his mind! Taking, from the brains of him and Owen, thoughts and stored knowledge and transferring them to the vast storehouse of the brains in the test tubes and in the bloated head of the ruler in the chair.

WHAT is the evanescent thing which we call a thought? A vibration? Electrical? Perhaps it is that. No human intellect on earth ever has been able to fathom the nature of a thought.

But here, now, upon this weird asteroid world, human knowledge was brought into the realm of science. Controlled. Transferred over wires, through tubes, and manipulated by what other strange mechanisms no one will ever know.

The ruler had moved the switch again. The current was off now—or at least altered to a lower intensity. And out of the silence the ruler's low, guttural voice was saying:

"I—have it now. Your—strange language."

English! It came from his wide slit of mouth haltingly, with a queer accent. For his physical vocal equipment was different from that of the earthmen, inadequate correctly to pronounce the words—but the words themselves were correct.

Clark gasped.

"You can talk to us!" he said unbelievably.

"Yes. Talk to you now. Your knowledge—added to mine."

He passed a hand across the bulging membrane of his forehead. There was a surge of movement within his head; and in the test tubes around his neck, the brain tissue was writhing.

"Your knowledge—confusing to me at first," he said slowly, "I will—have it sorted in a moment."

There fell a silence. Strange necromancy of science. But Clark now had accepted it as a weird actuality.

The instinct of life, of personal safety, is strong in every human. His thoughts swept into questions of how he and Owen might escape out of this. If only they could get control of that space-flyer; if only—

But his brain was still connected with the brain of the ruler. He had forgotten that. The ruler's mouth was upturned now in a monstrous ironic smile.

"But you cannot escape," he said.

"What do you want of us?" Owen burst out. "We never harmed you."

"I wanted—your language. I have it now. And the knowledge of the things in your strange world."

His voice droned on. He talked slowly, carefully, as though his purpose were not so much to inform his prisoners, as to practice for himself the use of these queer English words.

"I am about to conquer your earth," he said. "I can realize now how easy it will be. My expedition is ready, waiting my command. Survival of the fittest. I notice you have a phrase like that. Your people must die to make room for mine."

**H**IS slow recital was horrible in its calmness. Quietly he explained.

The asteroid—a wanderer in space throughout all the known history of its inhabitants—was heading now for the sun. It was rapidly warming. Soon it would be fiercely hot. And the barrenness of it was changing.

Heated by sunlight, vegetation here which for centuries had been dormant in the cold, was springing into life. Amazing life. Menacing! The little brown-shelled people were

fighting it now. And other things were springing into life. Things formerly microscopic were hideous now with gigantic size. Most of the asteroid already was overrun with them.

**T**HE little world was doomed. Fertile through ages past with frozen dormant life, it all was springing now into lush growth and movement under the unaccustomed heat of the approaching sun! A tiny world, loaded with hideous microscopic life ready now to overwhelm it.

And the internal fires of the asteroid — through past ages just enough to support this human life against the frigidity of outer space — were spreading now. Inflammable gases were expanding under pressure in caverns far underground. At any moment they might ignite and burst forth.

Doomed little world indeed! And so the earth had been selected for an exodus of these asteroid people. A conquest of earth—the survival of the fittest.

Clark stood amazed, listening. But under the flow of words, his thoughts were clear. An expedition of space-flyers, ready to start now for earth! It must be stopped. He and Owen must escape, get out of this. That space-flyer in which they had arrived—if only they could seize it!

Wild, hopeless plans! But they were better than none; and in them Clark presently seemed to see a rationality. A course of action, desperate, but at least possible of success. He asked, when presently the ruler paused:

"Where are these space-flyers which you say are ready to leave?"

"They are quite—near here. You would call it—on earth—a mile."

"The one we came in," Clark persisted, "is closer than that?"

"No. It has been moved to join

the others. I will take you there soon—everything is ready.”

“And your idea,” Owen exclaimed, “is to devastate our earth?”

The ruler nodded calmly. “Of course. Your people must die,” he said, “so that mine may live.”

Primitive reasoning. But to him it seemed natural, quite obvious. His face twisted into a monstrous smile.

“I have the weapons. All in a moment—I can kill a million—of your people. And my people will want your earth—in peace and security. For that, I must kill all of you.”

Again Clark realized that his thoughts were open to this antagonist. Up to now, the asteroid ruler had been so interested in his narrative that his mind probably had not yet become aware of Clark’s thoughts. But Clark was afraid of that. What might come!

“This wire on my forehead,” he said abruptly, “it keeps my mind all confused. Take it off.” He flashed Owen a warning glance.

Owen took the hint.

“You’ve got enough of our knowledge, haven’t you?” he asked.

The huge head nodded.

“Yes, I think so.” The ruler signed to the guards, and they removed the wires.

“Thanks,” Clark smiled. Queer, how much more clearly he could think now! A chance to escape—if he could manage it.

HE saw Owen eyeing him, puzzled, realizing that he had some plan. But the ruler spoke English now, and Clark could do no more than give his companion another significant glance.

“You want to know how I will devastate your earth? My electrical weapons would not do it very quickly—you have perhaps seen our flash guns operate? Not with flash-guns, but with the disease, I will kill you.”

Clark was hardly listening. If only he and Owen could be alone here with this ruler. Huge brain—body of a child. Helpless, physically. He did not seem even to have any weapons. If they could seize him—

Clark gestured at the group of guards who stood close at hand, curiously watching the scene. He was trying to think of some plausible reason for the ruler to dismiss them. He said, smiling:

“I’m afraid of your men. They stand so close.”

“We will leave here presently,” the ruler spoke impatiently. “We—”

HE stopped. He turned his great head as though listening. He had heard something that the earthmen could not hear. And the guards were aware of it. They stirred uneasily. One of them mumbled with fear.

The sound, obviously, was swiftly intensifying. Clark heard it now—a distant commotion. Eerie screams of the asteroid people. Weird rustling and scratching. The hiss of flash-guns.

An attack upon these caverns! A tumult of frenzied strife! It grew rapidly in volume. Approaching—

The ruler in the chair tried to stand upon his little feet. His wide spread of face was contorted with terror. He shouted at the guards. But they, too, were in terror, running—scattering. All in a moment, they had vanished from the cave room.

Clark’s chance! This doomed world! It had brought the opportunity he was seeking.

With a bound he was on the dais. The little ruler was wobbling on his feet. Owen followed instantly.

“What’s the idea?” he demanded breathlessly.

“Got to get out of here!”

“But we don’t know the way!”

“He does,” Clark reached down

and seized the ruler's little shoulder. The shell bent inward at his touch.

The ruler screamed. "You hurt me!"

Clark relaxed. "I didn't mean to. Can you walk?"

"Yes. A little. I am not—"

"You know the way out of here?"

"Of course. All these doors. But there is an attack—you hear it? These things accursed—"

"We'll have to break through them."

**T**HE wild commotion was much closer now. It came from the left-hand side of the room, where doors opened into corridor tunnels.

Owen gestured. "We can go the other way. There's a door there, and we—"

He suddenly stopped, staring down the length of the room. Clark followed his gaze. From the dais they could see the full stretch of the empty, blue-lit cave.

At the distant door through which they had entered, a huge blue-white leafy thing came slithering. A growing vine. Its leaves and tendrils spread forward over the room floor. Its growth was amazing. New lengths of it were springing into being every moment. New leaves, new tendrils, reaching, seeking something to grasp.

That way of exit was cut off.

"Can't stay here!" Clark snapped. "That thing will fill the room in a minute!" He reached down. With his left arm he scooped up the little ruler. The great head sagged on the spindly neck. The test tubes clinked together; one of them smashed. The little tentacle arms flailed; the bent and useless little legs kicked against Clark's side. The voice screamed:

"You hurt me!"

Physical pain. It produced an unnatural terror in this being whose

body had become useless, with intellect too great for it. He screamed again.

"You hurt me! Put me down!"

"If I do, you'll be killed here," Clark said, grimly, swiftly. "And you've got to show us the way to the space-flyers. I'm trying not to hurt you."

Owen already had leaped from the dais. "Come on!" he shouted. "We'll be trapped here! That cursed vegetation—"

The leafy mass of the invading vine already had spread over half the room floor. Its tendrils were thickening, reaching up toward the ceiling, waving and threshing. The whole farther end of the room was solid with it now.

Through the doors to the left, abruptly, came sprawling figures in screaming combat—the brown-shelled asteroid men, with things double their size attacking them. Clark had only a glimpse of things six feet or more in height—shapeless—not human—indescribable masses of living pulp, blood-red.

The silent blue-lit room suddenly was a chaos of horror, over which Owen was shouting:

"Jack—come on—this way!"

With the struggling brain-man under his arm, Clark leaped from the dais. He and Owen sped from the gruesome turmoil of the cave, through a doorway, and plunged into the dimness of an ascending tunnel.

## CHAPTER V

### *End of a World*

**T**HEY ran. There seemed a pursuit behind them, but ahead lay only a dim silence of upward slope. Owen led the way. Clark followed with his squirming captive under his arm. The brain-man was far lighter than an earth-child. Fifteen pounds, perhaps.

Once Clark bent down. "You stop



struggling. I can kill you with a squeeze of my arm. You know that?"

"Yes—I know it."

"And if I let you loose, those things—whatever they are, chasing us—you couldn't escape them."

It silenced his captive. "I want you to direct us to your space-ships," Clark added. "Will you?"

"Yes."

"The end of the tunnel," Owen called. He stopped, and in a moment Clark was beside him. A dark night spread before them—a dim vista of rocky distance. To one side, half a mile away perhaps, there was a confusion of moving spots of light. In the silence came the distant sounds of a turmoil. And then the hissing of flash-guns, and the near horizon of the convex surface was illumined with brief puffs of glare. A combat off there.

"Which way?" Clark demanded.

The head under his arm said:

"Hold me up. Let me see where we are."

Clark held up his captive.

"This way." One of the tentacle arms gestured. "A mile or less, you would call it, from here. But there is vegetation—newly grown—"

CLARK'S eyes, better accustomed to the darkness now, saw trees fairly close at hand. Tall, spindly growth, some fifty feet high. They waved in the night breeze—eerie, ghost-like.

"That way?" he demanded.

"Yes. But that is newly grown—" Terror was in the ruler's voice.

Owen said sharply:

"In the tunnel—things coming."

From the tunnel behind them, weird, oncoming cries were audible. Screams? Not that; for these sounds were indescribable—the cries of things unnameable.

They plunged off. Within a minute they were in the forest. Solid

blackness was here, save that on the tree branches there were luminous pods radiating a green phosphorescent glow. The tree trunks were porous—flimsy. They rose high overhead, with thick, entangled branches—a blue-white leafy mass, lurid with the green phosphorescent radiance.

The rocky ground held an earthy soil now. There was an underbrush, thin at first, but within a minute as they ran forward, it grew thicker.

SUDDENLY Owen was shouting: "This confounded vine!" He was ahead of Clark, invisible momentarily with tree trunks between them. Then his voice turned to terror:

"Jack, help! It's—got me!"

The startled Clark crashed into the thick tree trunk. It smashed with his weight, came down, splintered around him. He leaped over it.

"Jack, help!"

He saw Owen struggling in the grip of a huge vine. Leafy python wrapped around him, squeezing him, with a myriad of smaller tendrils writhing to clutch him.

Clark dropped his captive burden. He leaped, dashing into the vegetation—ripping it—kicking, flailing. Unlike the tree, the vine was sinewy. It writhed. Every branch of it which he touched, at once flung tendrils at him. Almost a thinking antagonist.

A minute or two of flailing horror, then Owen was released. The two men kicked themselves free. They saw, near at hand, their captive trying to run, his great head wobbling. In a bound, Clark had seized him. They ran onward.

Eerie passage! From every side now, in the greenish darkness, it seemed that giant tentacles were lashing, trying to grasp these human fugitives. The soft loam underfoot grew sandy, then spongy



and wet as quicksand. A morass here. They sank sometimes knee-deep.

It seemed an eternity as they fought their way forward. Panting now—winded—thrown down by an entangling vine—ripping it apart—gaining their feet again and stumbling on.

Then, abruptly, the ground hardened. The trees thinned. The underbrush and the slashing vines were gone. Ahead of them again the rocky darkness showed, with a red glare. There was smoke off there. A sulphurous smell.

**THEY** emerged from the gruesome forest; stood on an open rocky expanse, panting, struggling for breath. Behind them in the woods cries resounded, cries of pursuing things from the tunnel. But the two men did not heed what was still behind them. They stood staring at the turmoil ahead. A rocky amphitheatre was here. It was painted red by the distant lurid glare.

The expedition of space-ships ready to depart for the conquest of earth! It had been that, a few hours before. But what a turmoil was here now!

In the bowl-like depression, the lip of which was close at hand, some fifty space-vehicles were racked. Gleaming cylindrical ships, of several sizes and shapes. Decks covered with transparent domes—the armada of the little asteroid. But it was in distress now. Giant vegetation was slithering from the darkness, entangling the ships at the outer edge of the bowl.

It was a chaos of turmoil. Myriad shapeless things, of human size, were everywhere leaping and pouncing. A thousand, perhaps, of the asteroid people were here on the ships and on the ground between them. A thousand individual combats. A wild chaos of screams.

One of the ships rose drunkenly into the air. Its deck, under the transparent pressure dome, was black with the struggling figures. It rose no more than a hundred feet, wavered and crashed back, smashing two other ships in the wreckage. Fire broke out in the litter.

The flames illumined the interior deck of another ship, on which was a huddled group of the little brown-shelled asteroid people. Monstrous blood-red shapes of things inhuman rolled and surged and pounced upon them. Devoured them. Turned, palpitating for other prey.

A tremendous heat was here. Breath of the distant fires, surging now from the ground. Incandescent gases, wafted on the night breeze. Owen was suddenly coughing.

From under Clark's arm, the asteroid's ruler panted:

"The doom—it—has come."

"Things — behind us—" Owen gasped.

Clark barely turned. Shapes of red things, coiled like hoops, were rolling out of the forest.

"This way, Ralph," he panted. "One ship—near here—"

Over the lip of the cauldron, one of the nearer ships seemed momentarily deserted. It was a small vessel, with only thin tendrils of vegetation entangling it. They fought their way to it. A doorway in its side was open. They plunged in.

**I**T was a ship no more than thirty feet long. The little corridor was illumined. Horrible passage! The walls and grid-floor were splattered. Leprous broken shells of what once had been asteroid people were strewn here, half devoured—and the invading things had gone.

An empty ship! With food tubes! Triumph swept Clark. They came to the control room. It was small, with transparent vizor-panes on three of its sides. The controls

were here. Clark set the asteroid ruler down before them.

"You have all knowledge—you can operate this?" he panted.

"Yes—I can operate it."

"Do it, then! Close the ports. Raise us. Your life—and ours—"

**T**HE ruler's four little tentacle arms reached for the levers. The ports slid closed with a grind. Through the vizor pane Clark saw that the dawn was coming, a swift twilight merging into grey daylight. The three-hour night of the asteroid was over.

Two other ships rose, and crashed. The cauldron was a litter now. The vines were spreading everywhere—a tangle in which the myriad blood-red shapes were lurking. But the turmoil was soundless, shut away from within the little space-ship.

Seconds of apprehension. They seemed an eternity to the breathless Clark and Owen, bending over the bobbing head of the asteroid's ruler as he worked the controls. Would the ship operate? Could it break from the entangling vines? At the window ports, gruesome red shapes were crowding now, thumping futilely against the heavy bull's-eye panels, smearing against the windows in a blurring crimson ooze.

The current hummed. The bow lifted. The little vessel jerked against the hampering vines, then broke free!

Free! They were rising! The glare and the turmoil fell away. Overhead was daylight, and a spread of grey clouds.

Clark breathed again.

"We did it, Ralph! Safe!"

Safe? In the control room behind them, they heard a thump. Clark whirled. Owen stood with hands outstretched before him, gaping with horror. The asteroid ruler turned and sucked in his breath with a gasping whine of fear.

These red things—Clark had seen them only at a distance, caught brief glimpses. But one was here in the control room now. The crimson, gruesome horror was shut up here with them, in this small room. An antagonist. A menace that must be killed, now!

Through a second of stricken fixity Clark stared, bathed in sweat, his blood seeming to run like ice through his veins, a constriction in his chest as though fingers of fear were squeezing his wildly leaping heart.

The thing had come rolling into the control room; a looped crimson thing like a great hoop. At the door it straightened into an oblong, upright shape—a cylindrical rod two feet thick and six or seven feet high—a mass of crimson pulp. It stood palpitating, bouncing, as though to maintain balance. An oozing, pulpy mass of semi-solidity!

A disease germ!

A little rod of red, Clark had once heard such a thing as this called by a learned man of science; and through a microscope he had seen a squirming group of them. Infinitely tiny. Far too small to be seen by the naked eye.

And here was a single one, grown monstrous. The germ of tuberculosis, though of a nature different from earth, doubtless. Disease here—visible, ponderable human disease, insidiously microscopic no longer, grown gigantic, hideous, revolting beyond human conception.

The thing lurched forward, and in an instant they were engulfed in it!

**T**HROUGH a blur of horror, Clark felt his hands ripping the sticky mass apart. It clung, gluey, writhing, wrapping itself around him. Then, all in a moment, he and Owen had strewn it over the room. Sickening, stenching litter here, in the midst of which they stood panting, senses whirling.

But the thing was dead. And Clark was aware that the asteroid ruler had neglected his controls. The ship was lurching.

"Steady us!" Clark gasped. "Never mind this—we're falling! Steady us!"

The brain-man swung back to his task. Clark, bending down, watched for a moment how the controls were operated, asked a few questions.

The ship righted, rose higher. The surface of the asteroid, lighted now by flat grey daylight, lay spread beneath them. Gigantic battle-ground! The rocks were all covered by the leafy, crawling vegetable growth, through which the monstrous disease germs were surging, seeking out the few remaining little humans to be devoured. A single last flashbolt spat from the horizon, as though to mark the end of the struggle.

The ship rose higher. Far to the right, Clark saw the red-yellow fire mounting into the air, with a rolling cloud of dark volcanic ash.

"Jack! Look out!"

Owen's startled, warning voice sounded. Clark swung, and saw that the brain-man had left the controls. He stood against the wall of the room. His bloated head wobbled; his crooked little legs bent and shook under his weight. One of his tentacle arms held a gleaming cylinder which evidently he had snatched from a wall-rack over his head. His single eye gleamed with a baleful phosphorescence.

**I**RRATIONALITY! Insanity! On the monstrous travesty of the face, Clark saw it plainly. The test tubes of brains around his neck were all smashed now. Within his transparent membrane head, the brain tissue was writhing.

Intellect gone mad! Deranged by the terror of this revolting, pulp-strewn room! His guttural voice rasped.

"You cannot take me prisoner! Alone, I can conquer your world! I am the Master Intellect."

His waving cylinder spat forward. But the flash went high, sizzling against the metal room ceiling. Owen had leaped, and Clark was hardly a second behind him. They struck the bloated membrane head almost together. Mashed it, with the tiny shell-like body, against the wall of the room. The brain-man's voice split with a chilling scream, mingled with a gruesome squash as the head burst and splattered.

The two men picked themselves up. They did not look again at the mashed thing against the wall which a moment before had been a human madman.

**A**GAIN the rising little space-ship was out of control. Clark sat at the levers. He had watched the asteroid ruler; and watched, also, the control of the other ship as they were nearing the asteroid from earth. The panting Owen bent over him. "Can you work it?"

"Yes. I think so."

A moment of experimentation. Then the ship steadied, rising normally again. The lurid surface of the asteroid was far down now, the heavy cloud masses close overhead. And suddenly there came a rift in the clouds. Fierce, dazzling sunlight struck through. Not the sunlight familiar to earth. This was infinitely hotter. Gigantic sun, so close now!

The sunlight beat in great shafts upon the asteroid's surface. And like the ray of a burning glass, it shriveled the monstrous vegetation. All in a second, upon the distant horizon, titantic jets of inflammable gases were ignited. Huge tongues of red-yellow flame shot forward, tremendous, spreading fiery incandescence.

A rolling, tumbling sea of fire was

down there now. Doomed little world! Gigantic pyre, to mark its end!

Smoke rolled up in vast dark columns. A titantic chimney of heated air was surging up. Like a tiny blob of metal in a furnace blast, the ship was whirled upward, through the tumbling cloud masses, and hurled into space!

ON earth, on the morning of August 11th, there appeared in the newspapers a small item which noted inexplicable deaths of Professor Owen and his negro servant. Ralph Owen, son of the professor, and Jack Clark, of the *American Press*, were missing.

But the item caused very little public comment.

Nor—weeks later—was the public more than mildly interested by the news that the wandering asteroid had rounded the sun, come out again and at last was gone, back into the remote realms of interplanetary space from whence it had come. Harmless wanderer! The few imaginative souls who had been excited over its presence—those days in August—realized now how foolish they had been.

But in November, the entire world was startled. The captain of a

Pacific passenger liner, midway from San Francisco to Honolulu, saw something come wavering down from the sky one placid starry night. It was the little space-ship which, during all these weeks, Clark had been struggling to navigate back to earth.

But the captain of the liner did not know that, of course. He stared, amazed, as the small cylindrical thing wavered drunkenly and struck the placid, starlit ocean surface only a few miles away.

The gleaming metal shape sank in a moment. But the captain's glasses disclosed, bobbing on the surface, what seemed to be two swimming figures. He sent a boat and picked them up.

THUS came the end of an adventure which for a time electrified the world. Then the world forgot. The asteroid had done no harm and was gone.

And everyone had his own troubles to worry over.

But to Jack Clark, pondering the amazing fantasy through which he had lived, there often came memory of the doomed little asteroid; of its struggling humans, beset by every adversity of hostile Nature. Survival of the fittest! Thus it had been meant to be. Thus it was!

*Adventure Aplenty*

And that, if you ask Ye Olde Globe Trotter, is adventure aplenty for any man. If that's the sort of action they feed 'em on in the Marine Corps, no wonder Bro. Burks can turn out action yarns!

He was there and got plenty of it at first hand.

First-hand dope is no doubt the best equipment a writer of adventure stories can have. That's why we pride ourselves on the caliber of our writers and the authenticity of their yarns. They were there, and they know what they're talking about.

But wait a minute—we seem to have hit a snag! How about this fellow Cummings, who contributes that fine novelette, *WORLD OF DOOM*, to this issue? Was he there? Is that why he knows?

A fair enough question. So we served it up to Ray Cummings; and here's his answer:

Dear Globe Trotter:

I must apologize for the fact that I was not personally upon the asteroid at the time the thrilling events recorded in "World of Doom" occurred. But I did visit the mysterious invading world some three weeks previously, when it was still beyond the orbit of Jupiter. I made the trip especially for the gathering of data out of which to build the story. So I can assure you that "World of Doom" is authentic in every way.

You once asked me how I happened to embark upon the writing of this "crazy scientific fiction." That question has often been asked me by fans, who sometimes are kind enough to answer it themselves by suggesting that I must be a dope fiend—and other pleasantries. I have never before answered the question, but I will now.

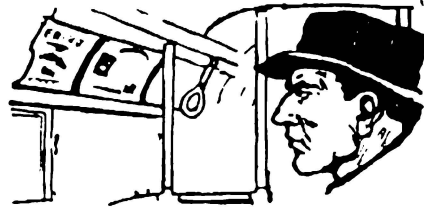
Once I was a very earnest young busi-

*(Continued on page 154)*

(Continued from page 153)

nessman. I think I was about to become the advertising manager of an industrial concern of national fame. But unfortunately for me—and for my readers, also, no doubt—I took a subway ride. I recall it vividly. I had, of course, no idea that I was on the threshold of momentous misfortune.

I recall that on that subway ride I sat idly staring at the advertisements over the seats across from me. And my attention was caught and held by an ad of the



Quaker Oats Company. It showed the portly figure of a Quaker gentleman in a three-cornered hat. He held in his hand a package of Quaker Oats, on which was a picture of the same gentleman holding a similar package. And on that package I could distinguish a still smaller Quaker holding still another tiny package.

I stared spellbound. I began to wonder if, by going closer to the ad, I would see a fourth smaller Quaker? And a fifth? If I had a microscope—and the printing were mathematically perfect—how many could I see?

An infinite number! Quaker Oats, down into an infinity of smallness!

I went home, seized pencil and paper. I had never before written a word of fiction; but my first chapter sounded so good to me that I resigned in lordly fashion from the aforesaid company of national fame. They told me I was crazy—as of course I am. A case indeed of, "Fools rush in where angels fear to tread."

But I was blissfully ignorant. I wrote with complete confidence that story which afterward was known as "The Girl in the Golden Atom." I think in its plot, construction and handling, that I broke every known rule of fiction writing. For instance, my hero throughout the entire story was known only as the Very Young Man. When the book was in proof, a harassed proofreader telephoned me, demanding to know "what the blinkity blink is the name of this hero guy?" And I told him I didn't know, except that he was the Very Young Man, and to let him and me alone, because I didn't want to be bothered.

So through magazines, newspapers and books, to this day, my first hero remains just the Very Young Man.

Ray Cummings.