

MARCH

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# AIR STORIES

## WONDER



The Return of the Air Master      Other Science-Aviation Stories by  
by EDWARDE E. CHAPPELOW    EDMOND HAMILTON    GEORGE ALLAN ENGLAND



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**Title:** The space visitors

**Author:** Edmond Hamilton

**Release date:** July 19, 2024 [eBook #74075]

**Language:** English

**Original publication:** New York, NY: Stellar Publishing Corporation, 1930

**Credits:** Greg Weeks, Mary Meehan and the Online Distributed Proofreading Team at <http://www.pgdp.net>

\*\*\* START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE SPACE VISITORS \*\*\*

# The Space Visitors

**By Edmond Hamilton**



*Illustration by Paul*

**[Transcriber's Note: This etext was produced from  
Air Wonder Stories March 1930.**

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*Just as we look upon fish as inhabitants of the ocean, so some beings from outer space may look upon us as being inhabitants at the bottom of an atmospheric ocean.*

*Such beings, possibly gigantic in size and power, coming in the vicinity of our earth, may, for purposes of curiosity or exploration, decide to discover what we queer beings are, and what this little planet is that we inhabit.*

*That such beings may have actually come near the earth, is asserted forcibly by Charles Fort in his amazing book, "The Book of the Damned," in which he brings forward evidence to show that over a period of the past 150 years there has been evidence of strange extra-terrestrial activity, presumably from sentient beings.*

*As Mr. Hamilton so truthfully points out, we beings of the earth are not at all isolated. Any day we may have plunged upon us an enemy from space that would have no more regard for our civilization than we have for those of the ants and other insects.*

*How we may combat such enemies, Mr. Hamilton shows in quite a remarkable story.*

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Because Dr. Howard has asked me to prepare a concise account of the coming of the space-visitors, I, Stanley Ransome, have tried to write a simple record of my own contacts with them. Such a record will necessarily have errors enough; but it seems to me that the facts can be most clearly presented in such a fashion.

It was late in June that I first learned of the affair, through Dr. Howard himself. Dr. Jason Howard was holder of the chair of Aeronautical Science in Gotham University, and his contributions to the progress of aerial

navigation had made him renowned in both scientific and commercial circles. For two years I had been an instructor and assistant in his department of the university.

Toward the end of that particular June afternoon he came into the laboratory where I was testing the tensile strength of a new alloy, and handed me a folded newspaper.

"You haven't seen this, Ransome?" he questioned. "They're shouting them all over the city."

"I hope you haven't ruined a completely good test to call my attention to the latest murder," I jested, as I unfolded the paper. But when my eyes took in the import of its black headlines my smile vanished. They shrieked their message in the tallest available type:

HUNDREDS SLAIN IN IOWA VILLAGE BY  
CATAclysm! MANNLERTOWN SCENE  
OF MYSTERIOUS HORROR!

The story below the headlines described what was then known of the catastrophe which had occurred just before dawn on that day. Mannlertown, an agricultural center of considerable size in eastern Iowa, had been awakened a short hour before daylight by a colossal grinding and roaring sound coming from the east.

Before the startled, half-awakened people had been able to leap from their beds, however, the thing was upon them. It was horror, earthquake, annihilation, all in one, driving across the town with immense speed. A terrific crashing of shattered buildings spread through the community, and for an instant the gigantic grinding roar seemed receding westward. Then it had stopped completely.

It was several minutes before anyone in the stunned city ventured out into the streets, half-curious and half-terrified. But those who finally did so were paralyzed by astonishment and terror. For a colossal path of destruction had been cut straight across the city's northern section.

It was like a gigantic trench or canal gouged out by a superhuman instrument, being over a quarter of a mile in width and almost as great in

depth. It began in an open field three miles east of Mannlertown and ended in a thinly-settled suburban section a mile westward.

Houses, people, trees, fences, roads—everything that had lain in the track of the unknown destroyer had vanished as though it had been whirled into space, and there lay open to the sun nothing but this vast wound in the earth's surface! Hundreds of people, it was estimated, had gone to death in the moment of the unparalleled cataclysm.

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### Doubt

It is not surprising that panic sent the people of Mannlertown fleeing in all directions before the coming of the day. The newspaper stated that federal and state authorities had taken every precaution to calm them, and already many who had fled were returning to the stricken town, it being apparent that no further disturbance was taking place.

But what had caused this one? Was it an earthquake or a volcanic action of some unheard-of nature? No answer could be definitely made, but the geologists and other scientists consulted regarding the thing were in general agreement. It could only have been caused, they stated, by some giant meteor that had grazed the earth's surface and gouged this great scar across it in passing. More could be learned from examination of the cut but it was certain that a meteor was the cause.

When I had finished reading I looked up at Dr. Howard, sobered by the horror of what I had just read.

"A terrible thing, surely," I said, and he nodded somberly.

"Just how terrible, is not yet realized," he commented.

"Why, you don't doubt that it was a meteor's work, do you?" I asked. "That great gouge—"

He shook his head. "Who can say? But if a meteor of giant size did it, where is the meteor? They do not as a rule, graze earth and then vanish, Ransome."

"Maybe not," I said doubtfully, "but in this case the scientists all seem pretty sure. And after all, what other explanation for the thing is there?"

To that he did not answer, though I could see that he was unconvinced. So I was not surprised when Dr. Howard left for Mannlertown that night by a fast Chicago rocket express. To me, as to others, he said only that he wished to make a brief examination of the scene of the disaster with certain ideas of his own in mind. I knew without his telling, though, that his doubts persisted.

The world at large did not share those doubts. There was wide-spread horror over the Mannlertown catastrophe, but it was the rather abstract horror aroused by some unprecedented accident of which the very strangeness somehow dulls the edge of reality. And none seemed to doubt the dictum of the scientists concerning the gigantic missile from space that had shot into the earth's atmosphere grazing its surface and then shooting out again. I know that, despite Dr. Howard's attitude, I myself did not doubt it.

Dr. Howard returned from Mannlertown two days later. The only information that he imparted was that his investigations had proved satisfactory. He said nothing more and, assuming that his inspection had disproved his doubts, I forbore mentioning the thing to him. It was not until the second cataclysm, a day later, that I learned along with the rest of the world, what his thoughts on the matter were.

This second cataclysm took place on the afternoon of July first, but, because of the remoteness of its scene, word of it did not reach most of the world until the next day. For the scene of the second event was those bleak Finnish plains that lie east of the Baltic, and particularly one barren valley far from the nearest telegraph.

News concerning what had happened was scanty enough. The central fact was that upon one of that valley's slopes, something had gouged from the grassy earth a tremendous trench like the one that had been cut through Mannlertown. It was of the same general size—several miles in length and a quarter-mile in depth and width; but in that remote place it had done almost no damage to life or property.

The only damage to property, in fact, had been the destruction of a herder's hut that had been in the path of the thing. The seven herders who had occupied it, luckily for them, had been tending their flocks on the slope of a neighboring valley. All had heard a gigantic roaring and grinding sound, and had run up to the dividing ridge as the sound ceased, to be confronted by the great gouge below. One of them, however, had been on the ridge at the time and told an excited and almost incomprehensible tale regarding it.

He said he had been gazing down over the slope in question when the disaster had happened. First came a great flash of light in the air above, the flash of some colossal glittering body swooping from above to earth's surface. He could not describe what he claimed to have seen of it in that lightning-like glimpse, and could describe it only as of something huge and glittering, and roughly scoop-like in shape.

In the very second that he saw it, it had struck the slope, and then with great speed had rushed forward, along it, half-burying itself in the earth, emitting a loud, grinding roar. In an instant it had streaked like light along the slope for several miles and then with an upward flash was gone, the noise gradually ceasing.

This tale, even doubted by the man's companions, certainly received small credit from the outside world. The paper that I read mentioned the story only as an illusion, born of excitement, and went on to point out that while the Mannlertown cataclysm had been repeated the explanation accepted for it had not been disproved. It simply meant that another giant meteor had grazed our globe, and it might well be that the earth was passing through a swarm of them.

I will own, however, that to me the meteor explanation seemed rather weakened by this so exact repetition of the first catastrophe, and I could not see how this recurring catastrophe could be explained so simply.

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### Howard's Theory

At the first news of the thing, I had sought Dr. Howard to learn his own views of it, but he was not to be found at the university. And by the time I



had met him the next day I, along with most of the world, had read the late editions of the newspaper in which he first startled the nations with his astounding explanation of the two cataclysms.

He stated that he had studied closely the scene of the first cataclysm, and had derived therefrom a theory as to its cause which he believed was substantiated by the second occurrence.

"No one who has considered carefully the Mannlertown catastrophe," he stated, "can credit for a moment the idea that it was caused by a meteor. Had a great meteor actually grazed the earth that night, the sky for a thousand miles would have flamed with its passing, even had it been able to pass out of earth's grip after entering it, which is an incredible hypothesis.

"The cataclysm at Mannlertown was not caused by a meteor, but by some vast scoop-like object that was drawn across several miles of the earth's surface with immense speed and in that way gouged out the great trench in the earth. This second cataclysm in Finland was obviously caused in the same way, there being no appearance of a meteor in the sky. The huge scoop of which I speak was actually seen in the second case by the Finnish herder whose story has been little credited. But the very wildness of which is almost a guarantee of its truth, especially coming from such an unimaginative person.

"We must accept, then, the theory that on two different occasions within the last few days a giant scoop of some sort has been lowered from outer space, dragged across the earth's surface for several miles with incredible speed, and then jerked upward again, taking with it the matter it has cut from the earth! Just as we men sail over the surface of our waters and let down trawls to drag along their beds far below, so someone, something or things, exist on the surface of the atmospheric ocean at the bottom of which we live, and is letting down trawls to drag its bottom, the surface of the earth.

"This idea may seem fantastic to many. We human beings do not think of ourselves as living at the bottom of an ocean; but a little reflection will show that to be the case. The atmosphere is an ocean, fifty to sixty miles in depth, covering all the earth. Our knowledge of it indicates that, becoming more and more rarefied, it has a fairly definite surface or limit a few score miles above us, beyond which lies empty space.

"So there is a great air-ocean, and at its bottom we live. The pressure at its bottom is tremendous, even as the ocean's pressure is tremendous near its bottom. But like the creatures that live far down in the sea's depths, we are so habituated to that pressure, and our bodies braced internally against it, that we do not feel it. If we were to be taken into empty space our bodies would explode as would fish taken from the sea's depths. And in the same way, were creatures accustomed to empty space to enter our atmospheric ocean they would undoubtedly be crushed to death by its pressure.

"It is that which in my opinion, accounts for this trawling from above. It may be that for centuries, while we have pondered on the planets and stars, ships from those planets and stars have been coming and going far above us, filled with creatures who have evolved in space as we have evolved in air and fish have evolved in water. We would know no more, dream no more, of the existence of those space-ships than the creatures at the seas' bottoms know of the great liners going and coming far above them.

"But suppose some of these beings, possessing space-ships, become curious as to what lies at the bottom of this air-ocean of ours. They could not venture down into it. What would they do? Would they not let their ships cruise to and fro on the surface of the air-ocean, and let down great trawls to drag the bottom far below, just as we men trawl an ocean into whose depths we dare not descend.

"I believe that is what is now going on. Far above us, at the surface of our atmospheric ocean, there are cruising ships or a ship, which we cannot see, holding beings from some great planet of whose nature we dare not guess. They cannot descend into our atmosphere but they are letting down their great trawl from above to drag the bottom, which is earth's surface, to see what lies upon it!

"And make no mistake! These beings, who may be infinitely beyond us in intelligence and science, and who are undoubtedly completely different from us in every respect, care naught for the wreck and ruin they may be causing with their trawls. Any terror they might loose upon us would mean nothing to them. For to them, high above, we at the air-ocean's bottom are no more than the blind, strange creatures that we fish from our own watery seas' depths are to us."

It seems unnecessary to describe the turmoil that was aroused by this startling statement of Dr. Howard's. It is hard to expose the wilful blindness of a world that now looks back upon that blindness with something like terror.

Dr. Howard's theory became the target of every form and degree of criticism during the ensuing days. His idea was susceptible to ridicule, and the scientists whose meteor-theory he had questioned seized the opportunity. *Did* we live at the bottom of an ocean, an atmospheric sea? *Were* we merely crawling things upon earth's surface, to be fished for and examined curiously by unimaginable beings and vessels far above? The idea was too humorous. The public's indignation dissolved into laughter.

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### The Third

A very conceivable fact was brought forward to demolish the "ridiculous" theory. If space-ships were passing to and fro constantly outside our atmosphere, why had they never been glimpsed by astronomers? Dr. Howard replied promptly to this by giving a list of unknown objects sighted by astronomers in space in the last decades, by Sporer and Wartman and Grek and Ferguson and Loomis, and scores upon scores of others, objects seen against the sun or moon or planets, and which had never been identified.

There was no more criticism on that score, but a side-issue was raised. Dr. Howard had stated that the atmospheric sea of earth had in all probability a surface as definite as that of an ocean. Many attacked this minor point, but were met by Dr. Howard with the cold data of many tests, showing that while for a certain distance the air becomes rarer with increased altitude, it seems thereafter to remain constant, indicating that from that point up to its definite end or surface its density is the same. There was no valid reason why an ocean of air should not have as definite a surface as an ocean of water.

Each new critical attack brought forward in those few days met with much the same treatment and the criticism on the part of Dr. Howard's enemies

began to change into bad temper and abuse.

I mentioned this to him on the night of July 5th, showing him an account of the latest attack. From my first reading of his hypothesis, it had seemed to me crystal-clear in truth, but conventional scientists had found its startling presumptions upsetting.

"They wouldn't believe it, some of them, if they themselves were picked up by a trawl from above and whirled around the earth," I said.

He shook his head thoughtfully. "I think that they will believe it soon, Ransome," he said. "If these visitations from above continue—"

"You think they will continue?" I asked. "After all, why should they? If beings out of space actually are trawling, they must have learned enough from their two attempts to satisfy them about earth's surface."

"I don't think so. For all we know, Ransome, they may be searching for minerals or ores or materials unknown to us, hoping to drag them up from the bottom of this air-ocean. Or they may want living things, for purposes of their own. Or it may be mere scientific curiosity. God knows what motives sway them, but let us hope for one thing."

"And that—?"

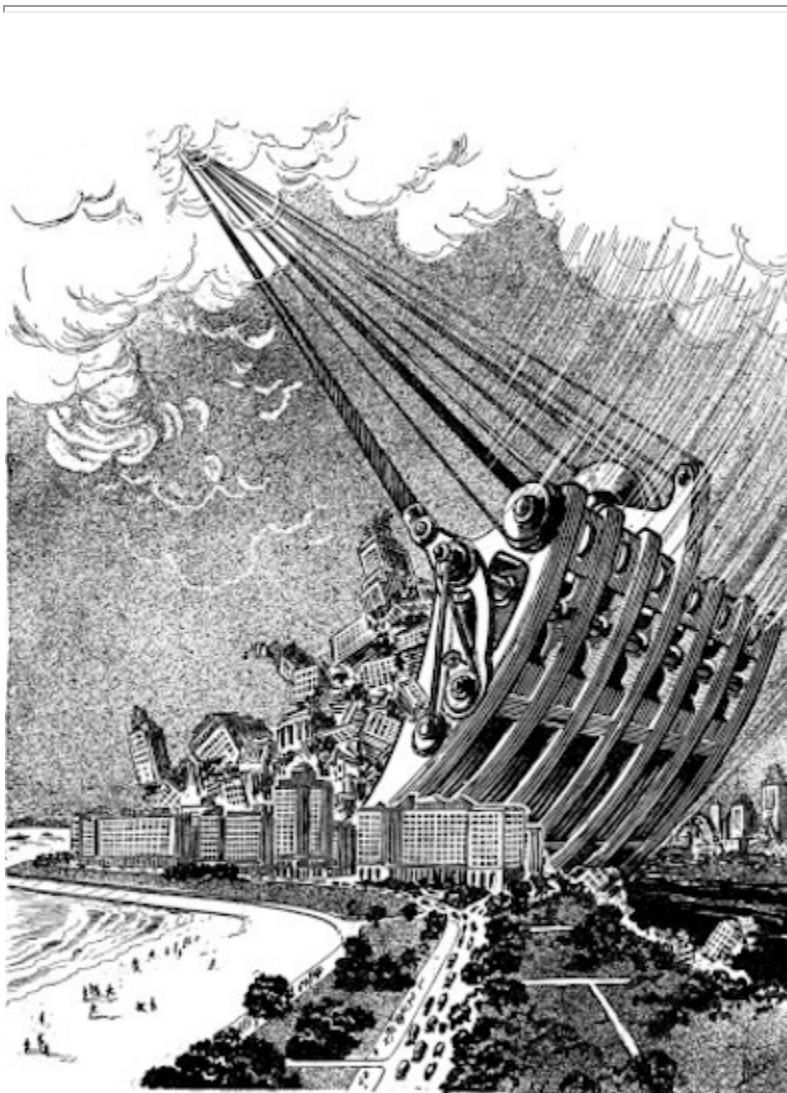
"That they do not find whatever they are searching for. For if they do; if they come to look on earth as a source of needed materials, it means the end of our civilization. Imagine those gigantic trawls descending in great numbers out of the skies day and night to gouge earth's surface—imagine perhaps great air-submarines or hermetically closed ships of some kind venturing down here to the surface—or submarine mines, caissons of some strange sort here at the bottom of the atmospheric ocean—creatures of dread—"

I shook myself clear of the horrors his words suggested. "After all," I reminded him, "this is a rather baseless fear. There haven't been any more cataclysms and it may well be that—"

Abruptly I halted. Through the open windows of the apartment came the growing clamor of shouting voices. We ran to the window and at the sight of the excited newsboys along the street I think that the same foreboding

gripped us both. Three minutes later we were looking together at one of the newspaper extras, reading it in a horror-dazed silence.

Only a few hours before, the terror from above had struck earth for the third time, and this time with the most terrible results thus far. For the victim had been Chicago! The colossal scoop which the excited Finn had attempted to describe had descended lightning-like out of the skies at dusk, and with incredible swiftness had cut a vast lane of destruction through the city.



**The colossal scoop had descended lightning-like out of the skies at dusk, and with incredible swiftness had cut a vast lane of destruction through the city. It glittered strangely as though composed of an unknown metal.**



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The giant thing had been seen more or less clearly by many thousands, despite the swiftness of its action. It was colossal in size, much like a steam-shovel's scoop in shape, glittering strangely, as though composed of an unknown metal. Its top disappeared far above into the night.

The thing had struck the city's southern acres and in a moment, with a roar as of worlds splitting apart, had cut northward across the city and for a mile or more out into the lake, then flashing up into the dusk as swiftly as it had descended. Chicago was in uncontrollable panic, Chaos of unnameable fear, and troops were on their way to quell the lawless rioting and looting that had already begun.

When we read that, both Dr. Howard and I were silent for some time, listening to the disturbed hum and roar of excitement that penetrated the room from outside. And before either of us could speak, we were sharply aroused by the coming of a telegram. Dr. Howard read the brief message twice, then handed it to me, without comment.

An hour later saw us in a great army plane flying southward through the night toward Washington.

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### A Conference

It was still night when our plane slanted out of the darkness into the blazing landing-field lights. A powerful car awaited us, and as it sped with reckless speed across the city which was as aroused, excited, and horror-stricken as New York, we could distinguish now and then the great dome of the Capitol, gleaming white in the light of dawn.

In a short time we were inside the Capitol, and were ushered into a small panelled room where a dozen or more men seated around a table awaited us.

I recognized at once the strong face of President Rogers, at the table's end, and perceived, also, the well-known features of the Secretaries of War and of the Navy. Beside them were the ambassadors of Great Britain, Germany,

France, and a half-dozen other great powers, while secretaries and aides hovered in the background. It was the group, representative of the world's governments, that the President had gathered together at once after the Chicago cataclysm, and he had summoned Dr. Howard to meet with it.

He greeted my superior and myself courteously; but the strain that he was under showed as clearly in his face, as it did in the others about the table. At once he plunged toward the point.

"Dr. Howard, some days ago you gave to the press a suggested explanation of the Mannlertown and Finland cataclysms which was, despite your scientific eminence, too startling to be accepted by the world or by your fellow-scientists. That explanation has now been shown by this catastrophe that has riven Chicago to have been irrefutably true. We must accept, unprecedented as the situation is, the fact that vessels of some sort from outer space are actually trawling the earth's surface from above its atmosphere, that trawl having been seen at Chicago by thousands, as it was seen in Finland. You alone among scientists have comprehended the nature of this menace. We have called you here to suggest some method of meeting it."

Dr. Howard was silent and thoughtful for a moment, gazing from one to another of the anxious faces at the table, then the President spoke again.

"You must be well aware of what the result of continued catastrophes of this sort will be. Already the wildest panic has gripped the section around Chicago, and the rest of the country. The whole world in fact is trembling upon the brink of a similar panic. The very uncertainty of these disasters encourages panic. None can say that the next blow will not be in his city and cut away his home and his life. All are aware now that your theory is correct, and that adds to the horror. For if a vessel or vessels with alien beings of some sort in it actually hover far above, none can say what greater horrors it may still loose upon us. We must strike back in some way, must drive these beings, whatever their nature, from the earth. Would there be any chance of doing so with dirigibles or planes, in your opinion?"

"Not a chance, sir," Dr. Howard replied at once. "The rarity of the atmosphere at its surface makes even an attempt impossible, for no ship of ours could ever reach the surface of the atmosphere."

"But what are we to do? Is there no method by which we can combat this menace? Must we lie supine and let whatever cataclysmic terror they choose descend on us?"

All eyes were upon Dr. Howard as he gravely answered. "Since I first comprehended what lay behind these catastrophes I have sought for some method of halting them, some method of striking back at whatever ship or ships from space are hovering over us. To find such a method I have had recourse to the same analogy that has been made so terribly clear to us, the analogy between ourselves at the bottom of our air-ocean and the creatures at the sea's bottom.

"Suppose those creatures far within the sea's depths had some intelligence and science, and suppose they wished to halt the trawling of our ships whose great scoops sweep down now and again upon them. How could they do so? They could not venture up to the ocean's surface. But one thing they could do, and that would be to send up something that would fight for them, that would make it impossible for the trawling ships to cruise longer on the surface!

"They could, granted science and intelligence enough, construct great mines in vast numbers. These, if attached to air-filled globes, would be swept instantly up to the ocean's surface when released. They would float there indefinitely, and any ships cruising to and fro would sooner or later strike one and be destroyed, unless they were warned by the previous destruction of one. In this way the creatures of the sea's depths could prevent our cruising above and trawling for them.

"And this is the way we must use to fight the beings who now cruise far above us! We must mine the air! We must send up thousands of great mines constructed so that they will float up to the surface of earth's atmospheric ocean and remain near that surface where, we know, the ships of these space-beings are coming and going. With thousands of mines floating about some of the invaders will inevitably be destroyed by a collision with one of them."

The others were silent for a moment. Then the Secretary of War broke out:

"Mine the air!" he repeated incredulously. "But how? How could any mine be constructed to float up in that way, so light as to float on the

atmosphere's surface?"

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### By Means of *Steelite*

"There we have recourse again to our analogy," Dr. Howard declared. "If a mine attached to a great hollow globe of air were released at the sea's bottom it would rush up toward the surface and float there. In the same way, a mine attached to a great globe in which is a complete vacuum would rush up through our air-ocean!"

"We can construct those globes of the strongest and lightest material known—*steelite*. As you all know, *steelite* is the recently devised metal that has immensely greater strength than steel but the merest fraction of its weight. The tensile strength of a substance, its hardness and other qualities, depend directly upon the arrangement of its molecules. By the recent discoveries of Browning we know that when *steelite* is synthetically made the arrangement of the molecules is such that it forms an extremely strong and rigid substance. This gives the material unheard-of strength with unheard-of lightness.

"A forty-foot globe of *steelite* can be made, with a charge of explosives of terrific power attached to it that will detonate when the globe is touched. This done, all air is exhausted from the hollow globe by great pumps, until the vacuum inside it is almost complete. The enormous strength of the *steelite* shell prevents its being crushed by the atmosphere's pressure as an ordinary steel shell would be.

"Released, the vacuum globe with its deadly charge will shoot up through the atmosphere with terrific speed. Its lightness for its size will be such that it will not halt until it floats on the very surface of our atmosphere. We will make these globes in countless thousands, each with its charge, and release them. Each globe will have a device that will repel any other, so that they do not detonate each other. We will sow the surface of our atmosphere with these deadly air-mines! Sooner or later the ship or ships cruising to and fro on our atmosphere's surface will strike one and will be destroyed by its

detonating charge. In this way, and only in this way, can we fight back against the beings from space who are releasing this horror on us!"

"But to make these globes or mines in such numbers will engross all the earth's industrial activities!" the British ambassador exclaimed.

"It will," Dr. Howard agreed quietly. "But what of it? Have you not yet realized that a world crisis is upon us? Have you not yet realized that in this case there is no question of countries or races, of profits or dividends, or expediciencies, but that we, as men, are fighting for the existence of man? That we are fighting against beings who may be immeasurably more advanced in knowledge and power than ourselves?"

"Dr. Howard is right," said the President. "Gentlemen, this emergency must be clear to you all, and I think that it is equally clear that Dr. Howard's plan is the only one that affords any possibility of combatting this terror from above. I place all the resources of the United States of America at your command, Dr. Howard, and I know that when the representatives of the other nations here have reported to their governments they will do the same. The whole world's efforts must concentrate upon the prevention of these terrible disorders."

"There is but one thing earth's peoples can do," Dr. Howard said. "Make air-mines! Thousands, tens of thousands—they must be turned out in ceaseless floods and released. For it is only with them that we can repel the menace above us."

Make air-mines! It was the watchword of all earth's races within a few hours of that momentous meeting. For the President and the heads of the earth's other governments sent statements in which Dr. Howard's suggested method of combatting the danger was stressed as the world's one chance. Thousands of air-mines must be made at once and continue to be turned out until the menace was repelled—scientists agreed, as one man, that it was the one possible way of fighting these grim visitors from space who were hovering in their enigmatic vessels at the surface of our atmosphere.

Within a half day after the meeting Dr. Howard and I, aided by several masters of aeronautical, chemical, and physical sciences had drawn up the plans of the air-mines. Each was to be a hollow steelite globe forty-two feet in outside diameter. This would give the globes a gross lifting power of



about five thousand pounds and net of about twenty-five hundred. Attached in a special chamber at the side of each was the charge, a load of the most modern explosives, small in bulk but terrific in power, while striking-pins on the globe's sides made it inevitable that the charge be exploded whenever the globe was struck.

Through the night of the 6th, hundreds of men were busy in Washington turning out copies of the simple plans of the air-mine, and scores of planes were flying throughout the world with copies for all nations. On the 7th the manufacture of the great engines had already been begun in a hundred cities.

But on the night of the 7th the terror struck again. This time it was with small loss of life, but the psychological effects were far greater. It was upon upper Malaysia that the giant, glittering trawl descended, flashing down to rip a great trench of destruction through the jungle and along the edge of a native village, then flashing up again, leaving untold panic behind it.

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### The First Globe

As best they could, the governments of earth sought to dissipate the panic, pointing out that few lives had been lost, and urging greater efforts in the production of the air-mines. Already the first great steelite globes were rolling out of the big factories, and were quickly being fitted with the charge of explosives.

It was early on the morning of the 12th that the first air-mine was finished and released. Dr. Howard and I superintended the process, which took place outside one of the great Pittsburgh *steelite* works that was turning out the globes. Anchored securely to the ground, the globe was slowly exhausted of its air by the giant air-pump that had been equipped for the task.

The pump was disconnected. Then the globe was removed to a large open field near-by and reanchored. We could see clearly that the mighty globe, of incredible lightness, was straining upward with such force against the anchoring chains that held it that it seemed they must part. Dr. Howard reached forth and turned the lever that held the great globe anchored. There

was a whizzing sound, a puff of air in our faces, and the great air-mine had vanished, rushing upward at such tremendous speed that it had seemed to disappear before our eyes.

We all gazed up after it, as though to follow its course upward until it floated at last on the surface of earth's atmosphere. I think that the same thought held us all. This air-mine, this single globe we had released—it seemed such a puny weapon to use against beings who from mighty ships had let down the colossal trawl upon us. Was there actually any hope for us in this method?

Perhaps this doubt was felt by many then, but there was no cessation of the work, which after all held our only chance of striking back at the great space invaders above. By the next day, here and there over earth's surface, scores of the air-mines were being released, to rush upward. In Germany and the English midlands, in Russia and Pennsylvania and Indiana—everywhere on earth's surface where the air-mines could be made and assembled—they were being released in groups.

The great industrial leaders of the world had gathered, under Dr. Howard's heading, to devise plans for the quantity production of the air-mines with the greatest possible speed. Already great factories were being hastily equipped with special machinery, and the explosive factories of the world as well as those producing the repelling devices were working night and day to manufacture the needed materials.

By the 15th, scores of the globes were being released each hour, here and there over the world, and their number was rapidly increasing. Dr. Howard was sleeping but two hours out of twenty-four, it seemed, remaining night and day at the Washington office that had become the center of the world's activities. He estimated that within a week the air-mines would be pouring forth at the rate of a thousand a day.

"The great danger," he said, "is that the next attack on us might hit one of the great cities so hard that the inevitable panic will cause a cessation on work on the air-mines."

"But how long is the work to go on in any case?" I asked. "There must be thousands of globes floating already upon the atmosphere's surface."

"There need to be tens of thousands, hundreds of thousands," he said solemnly. "They must be sent forth until these terrible trawlings from above have entirely ceased."

I shook my head, for I could see that already many, tired of the ceaseless work, were crying out that the scheme was a crazy one. Others had begun to say that whatever space-visitors had been above had already departed. But these statements were swiftly silenced on the next morning, that of the 16th, by the fifth catastrophe.

This fifth blow took place at one of New York's residential suburbs, Scarsdale, and while it took a toll of life exceeded only by that of the Chicago horror, it was different from the others in one odd respect. The great trawl seemed to descend and gouge along the earth with somewhat smaller speed than in the other instances, and was seen very plainly and even escaped from in time by some people in the vicinity.

It was described as being very like the familiar steam-shovel scoop in shape, but of a glittering metal that all agreed was not native to the earth. The top of it, what supported it, ran up into the mists of the morning sky. They were many shining strands, and very slender for the colossal weight they supported. They gleamed with strange light and it was the opinion of many that if they were of metal they had in some unheard-of way been given supernatural strength.

At Scarsdale perhaps twelve hundred perished in the sweep of the giant scoop, which seemed to make a smaller gash than usual. A few who had heard the trawl crashing toward them had managed to flee from its path in time to escape it.

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### Hope and Fear

This fifth catastrophe marked the beginning of the terror's last period. Until then earth's peoples had hoped against hope that in some unexplained way the whole business was the result of natural forces, but now they could no longer doubt that far overhead were hovering vessels or vehicles dragging their trawls here and there over the earth's surface for their own

unfathomable purposes. Dread was upon the earth! At any moment of day or night the giant trawl might crash down in terrible annihilation.

It was the sword of Damocles, suspended over a helpless world!

The days after the Scarsdale terror saw the world's activities at their most intense pitch. Dr. Howard and I were occupied without end in the direction of the manufacture and distribution of the air-mines. For he was now having them released, not at the factories where they were assembled, but at various points over the earth, so that they would cover more uniformly the surface of the atmospheric ocean.

Day after day we sent them out. I know that to me those days were part of a dream of nightmare activity and tension. Again the world was waiting in dread for the coming of the great trawl. It did not come again, for reasons which we shall never guess, until the 19th. That interval of three days between trawlings was the longest that had yet elapsed. We owe much to it. Perhaps our world.

For in those days the air-mines were whizzing upward in fast-increasing numbers. By the 19th they were ascending at the rate of more than a thousand a day. All of earth's peoples, in the industrial regions at least, seemed toiling upon the one task of making the great globes. The world's hopes were raised. We were winning, it seemed, by sowing the atmosphere's surface thick with air-mines that sooner or later must demolish all or part of the space invaders. We were exultant, even. And then—

Shortly after dark on the 19th a trawl flashed down to gouge most of the town of Martiana, in southern Norway, from the face of the earth.

On the morning of the 20th another trawl, or the same one, descended and gouged the bed of the Mediterranean just off Capri and in full sight of its shore.

A little before noon on the 21st a trawl was glimpsed plowing a vast wound in the Sudan desert near a British outpost. And three hours later a trawl cut a terrific trail of annihilation squarely across the city of Algiers.

Earth and the races of the earth rocked beneath those fearful cataclysms, striking in such swift succession. With them the activities upon which our races of man had been so fearfully bent—the manufacture of the air-mines—began to dwindle. By the 20th the number of air-mines released had

fallen off a little, and after the catastrophes of that and the next day it was even smaller. Dr. Howard's reports showed that on the 22nd but four hundred air-mines had been released in comparison with the twelve hundred released but three days before.

Mankind was giving up the battle in despair!

Panic was breaking loose over the earth, a panic and dread that nothing could restrain. Toiling thousands quit their work upon the manufacture of air-mines in hopeless despair. Mobs began to appear in the streets of London, New York, Shanghai, and Sydney, and rioting became general. The world was going mad with fear!

Dr. Howard strove above all else to keep the manufacture of the air-mines going. Under his urgent pleadings the governments of earth used their troops to protect and continue that manufacture as well as might be, instead of using them to suppress the growing riots. The production of the globes leaped again to almost a thousand a day. Each day saw them whizzing up to join the thousands upon thousands already floating at the surface of earth's atmosphere.

And yet it seemed all so futile. It was not like striking back at a visible enemy, this frantic manufacture and release of the mines. Men would have been happier by far, I think, had they faced more terrible enemies in the plain light of day. I know that in those last days of an apparently disintegrating world I would have been easier in mind.

"It's a race against time now, Ransome," said Dr. Howard. "We cannot continue the production of air-mines much longer—and civilization is crashing now!"

"But is there no other way?" I cried. "My God, Howard, these air-mines are useless—we've sent up tens of thousands and they can be no more than a sprinkling in the vast extent of the atmosphere's surface. To try some other way—"

"There is no other!" he exclaimed. "Ransome, we must fight it out to the end! The air-mines—they're our one chance!"

"But we can't send up many more," I said. "The rioting in Germany has become so bad that all the factories save two that were making mines there



have quit. We've no more than a dozen factories left in Europe and hardly more than that in America!"

"As long as we can release one mine we'll do so!" he declared. "Man's crisis is here—and he's got to have the courage now to fight in the dark against an unknown foe for his existence!"

Somehow Dr. Howard's indomitable will held together in those last days the thread of organization between the factories and their sources of supply, despite the wide-spread outbreaks that were going on. Fewer and fewer were becoming the air-mines released, but still they were being made and sent whizzing upward.

But on the 25th it became apparent to all that our last efforts were flickering out. Then late on that day came news of the tenth trawl. It had descended a hundred miles south of Rio de Janeiro to crash across a plantation with the loss of a score of lives. And hardly had that dread news spread around the earth than came word that the trawl had again flashed down a few hours later to gouge a terrific scar from the side of one of the peaks of the Peruvian Andes.

The end! With the spreading of those two reports it seemed so. For they so deepened the blind and unreasoning fear that had gripped mankind that the production of air-mines all but ceased on that day, only a few dozens continuing to be assembled and released. Panic-mad mobs caused chaos in the greater cities. Every organization of civilization seemed breaking down, and troops called to suppress wild outbreaks fought pitched battles with the mobs.

On the night of the 26th came the crisis for mankind. For it was known that all man's efforts to halt the menace from above had failed, that mankind lay defenseless beneath the grim and terrible invaders from beyond, who might at any time loose even greater horrors upon us. Man had fought an enemy he had never even seen and had lost! He had fought an enemy who apparently cared no more for the wrecking of mankind far beneath than we do of the insects beneath our feet!

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## Victory?

Through the hours of that dread night I sat with Dr. Howard and with the last of our remaining organization in the Washington office. Outside, to the east the sky was red with the glow of flames, where a mob had set fire to looted buildings. From afar we heard the crackle of shots, the rumble of hurrying tanks, and the wild uproar of cries as troops sought to bring order out of the chaos of a dissolving civilization. We were silent, in a silence that made each minute age-long. And it was there, silent, almost toward morning, that the last messenger of mankind's hope found us.

He was a dishevelled young radio operator and it was some moments before we comprehended what he was babbling frantically forth to us. When we did, twenty minutes saw us in the air and speeding southward through the night with an army aviator.

Over the fear-mad, riot-blazing city and through the night out over other cities we sped, at the plane's utmost velocity, Dr. Howard peering ahead with face set, I gripping the cockpit's rim with nervous, trembling fingers. We were still speechless as our plane raced southward. It was not until dawn was streaking the sky eastward that the plane bumped down into a field a few miles from a little Georgia village.

We found men awaiting us, in uniform and civilian clothes, and all were half-hopeful, half-awed. Swiftly they told us what had happened.

Shortly after midnight citizens near the village had heard a faint, almost inaudible but clear sound of detonation, coming as though from far above. Almost in the next instant had come another detonating sound, as faint as the first, and then silence. But a few instants later, coming from the west of the village, they heard in quick succession two terrific prolonged crashings as of some thing or things falling from an immense height.

They had thought the trawl was descending on them, at first, and had fled from it for some distance. But after moments of hesitation they had made their way to the scene of the crashes, and what they found had made them get word quickly to the soldiers in a near-by town, whose first act had been to radio Dr. Howard.

The captain, who was the commanding officer, told this much to Dr. Howard; together we went across the grassy fields. Before us, as we rose

over a slope, there loomed a great column of steam going up into the sparkling light of day. We went very near to it before we halted. So near that we could see even through its veiling mists great shattered masses of glittering metal, buried almost completely in the soft earth, from which they had smashed a huge crater in striking. We stared at it for a time, not daring to go nearer for the heat that had caused the steam still radiated intensely from the shattered metal. Not far across the fields was a thinner steam-column, and they told us that the colossal metal mass that caused it was buried even deeper in the earth, so deep that hardly any part of it could be distinguished.

Dr. Howard and I stared at the two giant geysers of white vapor. It was victory, we knew. Victory, whether partial or complete, over the space-visitors who had held earth beneath such a spell of terror. Far above, cruising on the surface of earth's atmosphere, two of their mighty vessels had struck a field of the air-mines we had released, had crashed in shattering annihilation through the dark night!

Victory! Yet it was not as I had dreamed the victory would be. I had thought of a wild climax after a terrific battle. It was so strange, so different. Just Dr. Howard and I and the khaki-clad soldiers and the wondering villagers, standing there in the soft light of the Georgia dawn, in the quiet fields with only the sound of birds about us, gazing so quietly toward those twin gigantic steam-columns. Then realization of what it meant struck through to my terror-numbed heart. Victory, whether partial or complete—it meant the dissolution of the spell of horror that had gripped earth, the gathering of earth's forces to carry on the struggle, if need be, against foes whom we now knew were not invincible. Victory, and in a few moments the word of it would be flashing out around the earth....

Our victory proved complete after all, at least in so far as it marked the end of the terrible trawlings. Whether the two huge space-ships that had met their end over Georgia were the only ones to come to earth, or whether there were others that were forced to flee by this destruction of their fellows, we cannot say. We know only that after the fall of those two through the night, the colossal trawls did not descend again. But for days, weeks, and months, the world waited in anxious dread for their reappearance.

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## "We Have Come of Age"

Even now that dread has not disappeared, wholly. For never again will earth seem to us the isolated globe that it once was. We know now that there are ships that come and go out there in the great void, ships from some near or far planet. They came once to visit the earth, to trawl in its air-ocean with their giant scoops, and they may come again. We cannot say that they will not. We can but pray that they will not.

Of their nature we know no more than before. Dr. Howard and the greatest scientists of the world have examined with the utmost minuteness the two great metal wrecks in Georgia, but have been able to learn comparatively little from them, so fused into molten metal were they by their plunge down through the atmosphere. The glittering metal of which they were constructed has proved quite strange and impossible to produce on earth. There have been found half-melted instruments or mechanisms in small number, whose purpose we cannot as yet understand.

What of the beings who manned those mighty ships? That is perhaps the greatest question of all, and the most insoluble. A thin coat of strange glistening slime was found on a few parts of the two wrecks not melted. Whether that is all that remains of the space-visitors of those ships, whether their bodies were solid or liquid or even gaseous or merely force emanations, we can offer only theories.

The world has recovered fully from those days of horror, and in recovering has given to Dr. Howard the honors due him. He is beyond all question the greatest figure in the world today and even on myself, as his companion and assistant, some of his fame has fallen. For he is the hero not of any single group or nation or race of men, but of all mankind.

He has used the tremendous influence that is his alone to urge preparation upon the world, preparation for emergencies of a similar nature that may again arise.

"Out of the unknown came these dread space-visitors to earth," he warns in an article, "and who knows but that somewhere in the unknown even today other grim vessels are winging through the void toward the earth? It may

even be that our present peace is only a respite and that we have repelled the first attack of these unknown beings only to have them coming again upon us in infinitely greater numbers. Sometime in the future, I think, man will have advanced in knowledge to the point where he too will venture into the void, will be able to meet his attackers face to face. But until then the air-mines are our only protection.

"I want to see vast fields of them floating on the surface of earth's atmosphere, fields through which no invading space-ships from the void outside can make their way. For Providence may not again aid our efforts. Man is probably but one being among the universe's countless races of living creatures, and he can only hold his planet against others by his own wisdom and strength. Never again can he feel the false security that was ours before these space-visitors came."

This warning, surely, we are heeding; yet even with the loss of that old false security, we do not face the future with fear. Whatever beings of power the universe holds, we realize now that we too are beings of power. We have fought for our planet against the space visitors and have held it. As a race we have come of age.

THE END



\*\*\* END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE SPACE  
VISITORS \*\*\*

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