



The MONSTER FROM MARS

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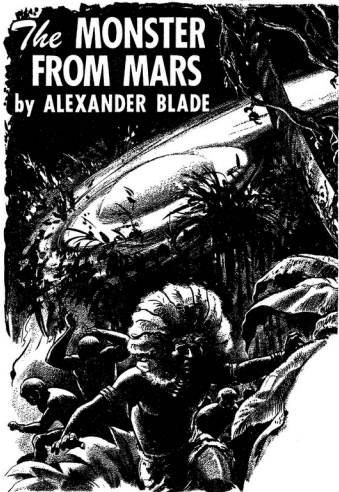
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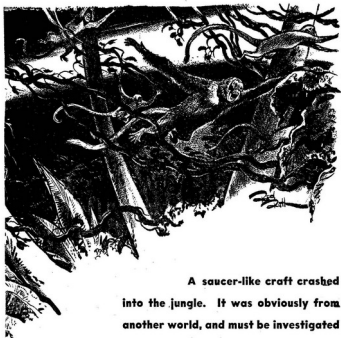
W. W. P.

The MONSTER FROM MARS

by ALEXANDER BLADE



The strange shape pancaked into the jungle with a crash



**A saucer-like craft crashed
into the jungle. It was obviously from
another world, and must be investigated**

THE vast shape of it seemed to blot the sun from the sky. It swept in low over the horizon and swooped down onto the tree-lined jungleland. For an instant it appeared as if it would clear the last barrier of jungle giants and reach its goal, a wide stretch of grassland, but at the last it pancaked into the fringe of border trees.

There was a dull crash of falling timber, then silence. Only the frightened squawks of birds answered the sound of the crash.

Pedro Argentes stepped slowly from the protection of the tree and peered

through bright, frightened eyes toward the near foreground. Behind him the muddy river wound through the swamp-land. Forgotten was the fish he was going to spear, forgotten the spear. It hung from limp fingers. Pedro had eyes only for the half-seen shape of the monstrous metal thing there in the trees just off the clearing.

It was silent as before, yet somehow more menacing because this menace he couldn't see could be felt. A horror born of his surroundings and superstition made him draw back behind the tree again.

His eyes were trained to see behind shadows, to discern the real from the fancied. There were odd markings on the great circular thing which looked like a giant shiny *frijole*. He could see that part which lay among the trees but he could not see beyond. At last curiosity overcame some of the fear and he moved forward toward it. He was still some hundreds of feet from it when he became aware of the fact that those markings were doors or windows. And the instant he came aware of it he also realized something else. That there were people. . . . He gulped in horror and turning, dropped his spear and fled from the spot as though pursued by the devil. . . .

* * *

Frederick Ward shifted the glasses higher on his thin-bridged nose with a nicotine-stained finger, looked down at the two people seated across from him and said:

"... So there it is. A story told by a frightened native, one Pedro Argentes. A flying saucer story not from the West. More, a fantasy of spiders huge as lions or crocodiles. What do you say to that?"

Merrit Hyland looked to his companion, grinned and said:

"What is there to say, that there is more, Horatio. . . . The facts are these. To wit, a native had too much pulque, saw visions of things only drink can bring and brought the tale to his village. . . ."

"Now just a minute, Mer," Gloria Grahame broke in. "Those are suppositions, not facts. The facts are that other natives of this same village went out, saw them also and reported the truth of these monsters."

"There are some who swear for the authenticity of the Loch Ness monster," Hyland put in sourly. "Let's not be childish about this."

"Children. Children!" Ward cautioned. "Let's get back to why I've called you in. You, Hyland, are going down to Campeche in Mexico to do some research. These reports emanate from there. Spiders are surely down your alley. It was just my thought that since you were going down there, you ought to take a look-see in on this."

Merrit Hyland placed his elbows on the desk, made an arch of his fingers and looked up through narrowed eyes at the man opposite. His rugged features were screwed up in a scowl.

"And let me tell you something, Ward," he said fiercely. "You might be the Lord Potentate in this foundation, but if you think I'm going down there and waste time on this foolishness you've got another think coming."

WARD sighed windily and came forward around the desk. He stood before the other and shook his head slowly from side to side.

"I suppose I have to break a confidence and show you proof," he said. He reached behind him and pressed a buzzer on the desk. In a moment Ward's assistant came in. Ward whispered something to the man, who then left. In a short while he returned with a package.

Ward opened the wrappings and brought to light for their startled eyes a human arm. The man and woman were versed enough in anatomy to see that the arm had been torn from its socket. There were terrible lengths of scar tissue running down the forearm, as though huge teeth had chewed at it.

"Take a look at that," Ward said.

Hyland shook his head in disbelief.

"Understand?" Ward asked. "I too have never seen teeth marks like those. So I took micro-photos of the bite of a spider's mandible. They match these. . . ."

Hyland still doubted. "Do you mean to say that a spider tore that arm from some poor devil? Why—why he might have fallen into the river and had a crocodile grab him. . . ."

Ward threw both arms outward in a gesture of resignation.

"There is the scientific mind," he said. "Steeped in fact, without imagination. And I thought you were different, Merrit. That's why I wanted you to have the crack at it. Okay. I was going out there anyway. But I've got this conference coming up and won't be able to get away for at least three days. I'll manage alone. Thanks anyway. . . ."

"Wa—it a minute, Fred," Hyland snarled. "That's what I love about you. The original jumper-at-conclusions. Have it your way. So I'll look in on this village and see what they have to offer. But what about Gloria here?"

"Miss Grahame can talk for herself, thank you," Gloria Grahame said in deliberately sweet tones. "I'll be glad to go along. After all, what would you do without me? There *are* times when you *don't* know what hour of the day it is. Besides, if we do find something you'll want an amenuensis along."

"No! Absolutely and positively, no!" Hyland turned a flushed face to her.

"Yes, dream-man. Yes. And why not? You were taking me on this buggy expedition anyway. What's changed your mind, the bit of cadaver?"

Hyland grunted an unintelligible something, then held his silence. The truth of the matter was he had been greatly disturbed by what he had seen. Yet he could not bring himself to believe it. It simply had to be a delusion or drunken nightmare.

"Okay," Hyland said. "Come along then. . . ."

"I wouldn't miss it for the world," Gloria said. Her eyes said something



Merrit Hyland

Hyland couldn't read. He wouldn't have understood it anyway.

"Very well, then," Ward said, obviously pleased by the turn of events. "There will be no change in your plans, Hyland. Only try and do some sort of investigat . . ."

"I said I would," Hyland broke in.

"Good. I'll be seeing you, then. . . ."

"**H**OW long do you think it will take, Moas?" Reet asked.

"Hard to say," Moas said. "I'll keep trying. Of one thing we can be sure, they saw us fall."

"Blasted engine!" Reet grunted. His eyes, a foot in diameter, moved slowly from side to side. Only Moas knew the intricacies of the complicated engine and Moas had assured him the

delay was only temporary. All this was well but they had a mission to perform. There weren't enough of them to accomplish any real good. That was why he had been sent down, to reconnoiter. . . .

"Have we taken any more of these odd creatures?" Moas asked. Two of his forelegs were busy in a delicate adjustment of a balance.

"It seems they're good only for food," Reet said. "It is obvious they are of low intelligence. . . ."

"H'm. Well, perhaps the scouts will bring some of higher intelligence."

"Small chance," Reet said.

The small monoplane circled lower and lower until it barely cleared the treetops. Gloria Grahame peered searchingly through the window on her side and said:

"We can't be too far, Mer. I thought I spotted the river a short while ago. Wait. . . . Down there. See. . . . Now we've passed it. But I saw a flash of light as if it were reflected from something metallic."

Hyland's brow was corrugated in a frown. His eyes were slitted in concentration. He too had thought he had seen the same flash of light and from the same spot Gloria had pointed out. He circled the plane still lower trying to bring it as close to the scene as possible. Now they were grazing the topmost branches.

It happened with the suddenness of a striking adder. A slender tube-like tentacle shot out from the midst of the branches and fastened itself to the landing gear and pulled it down. They fell with the speed of a plunging elevator.

Gloria would have dashed her brains out on the instrument panel if it hadn't been for Merrit's protective arm. As is was they were badly shaken up.

Seconds passed like the hours of doom. They were in a world of twilight. All about them was the jungle, green gloom, terrible and terroristic. Suddenly Gloria screamed, a horrible sound of terror mounting until the whole cabin echoed with it. Merrit whipped toward her, then turned his glance to where her wide-staring eyes were set in a hypnotized stare.

Some twenty feet ahead of the plane's nose was the most horrible thing he'd ever seen. A monstrous hairy shape was crawling toward them on legs which were like fuzzy-tipped timbers. The thing had a face, if one could call it that; at least there were a pair of eyes, great saucer-like things set on each side of a parrot beak and below it mandibles like great crushers of bone. It was a spider, but such as Hyland could not believe existed except in the imagination of science-fiction writers.

"Mer! Mer. . . . Do something. . . ." Gloria moaned and buried her face in her hands.

HYLAND had the quick perception of a trained scientist. His senses had taken in many things in the short time he had before his fingers flew to the starting switch. He had seen that they had been dragged into a gigantic spider web whose lines were like the rope hawsers of a battleship. The plane was fairly enmeshed in the web. But somehow the nose and propeller were free of the tentacles of gooy substance.

Then Hyland switched the motor on. It seemed as though years went by, and in that time the spider was within a foot of the plane. The roar of the motor's starting was like the call to dinner for a hungry farm hand. The prop turned slowly, then with accelerating speed until it was a blur before their eyes. And in another instant the spiders two forelegs reached forward

to rip through the glass.

They heard the sound of the thing even above the roar of the motor. It was like a wild, human scream of pain. And like something human it lifted the two forepaws or legs with which it had been about to embrace the plane's nose. The propeller had done devastating work. Either the spider hadn't seen or understood what those blades were. But it had struck the two legs directly into the path of their whirling circle and the blade had sliced them neatly in two.

Still screaming terribly, the creature backed up until it was out of sight.

"Glo. Quick! Out of here. . . ."

She seemed paralyzed from fright. Merrit undid her belt and lifted her bodily from her seat. It wasn't until he had dragged her to the door that she realized the spider had gone. She snapped out of her stupor then. There was a patterned arrangement of vine creepers almost at the door. Gloria started to reach for one of the thick strands, but stopped with her hand outstretched at Merrit's shout of warning:

"Don't! That's the spider's web!"

She jerked back as though the thing was ablaze and clung to Merrit like a leech. He had taken the situation in at a glance. The instant the immense insect had caught his prey he had begun to spin the web. In the few moments of drama the web was almost complete. But because of what had happened the spider hadn't quite time to finish his spinning. There was a shallow opening between the branches. Merrit and the girl scrambled through that opening.

Merrit's brain was hitting on all cylinders. The spider had been badly hurt but not mortally. It would soon be back. It was very probable also, that it would bring others. They had to get out of this particular neighborhood, but fast.



Gloria Grahame

The ground they landed on was soft, spongy, typical jungle marshland. The brush was thick with bush and creeper. Flowers grew in thick profusion and perfumed the air to a sticky sweetness. But Merrit had neither ear for the wondrous sound of birds, or nose for the odors of tropic flowers. He saw, weighed, and appraised their chances of escape by the reality of physical barriers, trees, vines, land and water.

He had taken a mental fix of their position at the very instant of their entanglement in the web. To the northwest some hundred miles was the lowland of Tobasco, to the southeast the state of Campeche. Though the distance to Villa Hermosa, the nearest town was at least fifty miles off, and though there probably were villages closer, the villages would have to be in

the heart of the jungle. They had some ten miles to go in the direction of Villa Hermosa and they would be out of the jungle. It was the only direction which would provide some safety.

ABOVE them the roar of the motor was being accompanied by other sounds, ripping tearing ones. The vibration was tearing the plane loose from its prison. Merrit grabbed Gloria's wrist and started off at a slithering run through the muck. They hadn't gone more than a hundred yards when there was a terrific explosion and a sheet of flame burst from the spot they had just quitted. Merrit had been right in his supposition.

Their single thought had been one of escape. In the cabin of the small plane were two instruments of indispensable use in the jungle, machetes. Both, man and woman, had guns in the holsters strapped to their belts and clips of ammunition in their pockets. But Merritt had an idea it was going to take more power than their pistols possessed to stop these insect giants should they meet again.

Merrit was keen-eyed, sure-footed from the years of jungle work. But the girl was a hindrance. She slipped in the muck, somehow always managing to find the thorniest creeper in which to entangle herself, the slimiest mud in which to slip, the lowest branches into which to stumble. Their progress was slow, painful, creeping. And if all that wasn't bad enough the thought of the terror which might be hard on their heels rode, a horror on their brain.

How long they ran and how far they'd gone before Gloria gasped: "Mer. Please . . . Wait-a-minute. I'm fagged," they had no idea. Merrit looked behind him, saw and heard nothing, and placing his hand on his knees bent and gulped in air. The

girl leaned against the bole of a jungle giant, her head hanging low, almost against her chest, breathed in long, slow gasps.

After a few seconds in which he recovered his breath, Merrit stepped to her side and said:

"I'm sorry, kid. But we can't take a chance and rest too long. I know this is going to be tough on you but we've simply got to get out of here. . . ."

Gloria Grahame was a woman, a glorious creature of beautiful proportions and lovely face topped by a wealth of hair the color of molten gold. At this moment she looked like a witch out of a production of Hansel and Gretel. Mud had caked on her forehead and right cheek. Her once-white breeches were slime-covered and slivers of cloth flapped disconsolately along one thigh. A thorn had caught her blouse and ripped it almost from her body and her bosom was bared almost completely. Her hair was in disarray and lay in wild profusion of curls about her face. At that moment Merrit decided she was the most beautiful woman he had ever seen. Some instinct, however, told him not to say anything about it. Instead, he went to her, placed his arms about her shoulders and said in gentle tones:

"I'm sorry, honey, that this had to happen. . . ."

From some inner core of courage, from some fount of fight she hadn't thought she possessed, Gloria drew sustenance.

"Don't be sorry, baby. I was frightened before. Now, I'm tired as heck, and dirty as an urchin, but full of the old fight. As you say, let's get out of here. . . ."

Again Merrit led the way.

IT HAD been fairly late in the afternoon when they had been entrapped. The sun, fighting to get through the

tangled and thick foliage was waging a losing battle now. The green gloom was darkening to black shadow and deeper darkness without shadow. Merrit had several worries now. He had to get out of the open. For one thing, this was malaria country. Back there in the plane in the small case he had brought along for such an emergency, lay the case with the tiny capsules of anti-malaria toxin. Even he, with many years of living in the jungle behind him, knew the treachery of sleeping in the open. There were a million biting insects which came out at night and would find the warmth of human flesh an inviting sanctuary. Worse, though much more rare, was the wild beast, a jaguar, or the snake. . . . No. They had to find shelter.

It was a race against the inexorable darkness and its accompanying terror. They won out in the short twilight of the jungle. As it was, it was only the merest chance that Merrit, using his faculties to the fullest, first smelled then saw the tiny jungle village.

The village consisted of a dozen straw-thatched huts, a common compound and several canoes drawn up the muddy shore of the river which cut across one end of the village. But of life there was nothing.

"Oh, Lord!" Gloria gasped as they peered from behind the shelter of the brush fringing the village. "What is that horrible odor?"

"Decaying flesh," Merrit said softly. "Probably human. Well, the place looks deserted. Might as well see what there is to be seen."

The village was not alone a place of refuge; it was also an oasis of light. The moon was brilliant, giving a light that was as good visually as sunlight without the brightness. Merrit moved from one hut to another until the last had been investigated. As he had sus-



Frederick Ward

pected when first he saw the place, it was deserted, though why was a mystery. Whatever the reason, it had been one which caused a precipitous rout. Primitive stoves and fireplaces still bore pots in which beans and corn had once simmered. In one hut, the most luxurious; it bore a table made of wood-cratting, there were plates of food still on the table. The same reason for the exodus came to both simultaneously.

"The spiders! They must have come," Gloria said.

"The spiders," Merrit echoed. "Yes. They came all right. H'm. I don't like that. They might come back."

"Uh, uh," Gloria said. "I have a feeling they won't. This food is at least a day old. . . ."

"And," Merrit broke in from the fireplace where he had gone to look at

the ashes, "these ashes are perhaps older. I think it's safe enough to stay the night. Now let's find a place to stay."

There were sleeping mats in a corner of the single room. Hyland took one and gave another to the girl with the admonition, "Watch for bugs."

She laughed and he was quick to note that the laugh was natural in sound and not forced.

"At least they'll be the small kind," she said.

"Good night," he called from the opposite corner.

She mumbled something and he arose and walked to her side. She was looking up at him. On her lips was a smile of infinite sweetness. He found it the most natural thing in the world to do; kiss her. Straightening, he went back to his mat. And when he called a second, "Good night," her answer had a "Darling" at the end of it.

FREDERICK WARD slapped fretfully at his perspiring brow with a kerchief which had once been fresh and white but was neither. Damp spots made large dark circles under his armpits. He held a map in one hand while he gestured with his free arm.

"Now look, Harrison," Ward said. "They must be in this region here. There is no word of them from Balancan or from Felipe. We know they left Villa Hermosa two days ago. We'll simply have to fly back and forth above this region in ever-increasing narrower circles until we spot either the plane or its wreckage."

"With the helicopter," Harrison, Ward's assistant, said, "it will make the whole business a lot easier than with another plane. How long before they gas the ship up?"

"Another hour," Ward replied.

Harrison looked up at the cloudless

blue.

"Good. We ought to have a minimum of nine more hours of light. We'll need it too. The moment shadows lengthen out here, observation becomes impossible."

They both turned at the sound of a shouting voice from the direction of the Villa Hermosa airport. Their ship was ready for take-off. . . .

Merrit Hyland awoke to the odor of cooking food. He sniffed appreciatively and rolled over and sat erect.

"Aah!" he said, smacking his lips loudly. "The lady knows how to cook."

"And many other things," Gloria said from the direction of the fireplace. She turned an impish look in his direction and wrinkled her nose at him. He stepped to her side.

"*Frijoles*, eh?" he asked.

"Well, don't sound so disappointed. After all, ham and eggs would be a bit hard to get; that is until I get next to the village grocer."

"He'd better not be good-looking," Merrit said.

"Jealous already," she said. "And here we're not even married."

"I'm going to remedy that soon as we get out of this pest-hole," Merrit said.

A silence developed as an aftermath to his words. Not until they had swallowed the last of the *frijoles* and drank the water she had boiled, did they speak again.

"I guess we'd better be on our way," she said.

His eyes had been narrowed in concentration. He nodded his head several times at something he'd been thinking and said:

"I think I'll take a look at that thing out there."

She followed the line of his pointing finger which was directed out the door-

way and saw that at the far edge of the village, on the very edge of the shore, there was a heap of something. That the something was dead was apparent. The wind was now from that direction and she felt nauseated from the odor coming toward them.

"I'll go along," she said in a steady voice.

"Might be a messy thing to look at," he cautioned.

"After yesterday's horror, I'm going to write Boris Karloff letters of derision," she said, and grinned up at him.

IT WAS the carcass of an immense monstrosity. The thing was covered by millions of insects winged and crawling. Maggots swarmed in an unholy feast upon it. Merrit suddenly threw his right arm outward as a barrier against her further progress. He had seen a long, dark shape that could only mean one thing, jaguar, digging among the crawling vermin.

The wind must have shifted because suddenly a wedge-shaped head lifted and turned in their direction. The growl of the animal came distinctly to them.

"Merrit! Let's go back," Gloria said, grasping Hyland firmly by his forearm.

The look of speculation in the man's eyes hardened to conviction as his hand slid down to the strapped holster. He slipped the catch and pulled the heavy-calibered pistol from its pocket.

"I think he'll run," Merrit Hyland said. "I'm not going to try to hit him. Just whistle one past his nose. If he's heard a gun before he'll high tail it for cover."

The gun roared and jumped in his hand. There was an answering roar from the jaguar, but though it was a sound of rage, the animal only lifted its voice once more and slunk off to the jungle.



Harrison

"Thank the Lord he wasn't hungry. If he hadn't feasted or was still hungry," Merrit said, "we'd have had trouble."

The odor of corruption was overpowering in its intensity. They had to stand and look from several feet away, so nauseating was it. The shape was indefinable but huge. It might have been one of many things, but that it wasn't a human, Merrit knew. The carcass was swollen to many times its original size of course. And with every passing second it was becoming less and less a shape, just a *thing*. . . .

"Look!" Merrit said, pointing to several objects near it. "Spears! And there. . . ."

"Bones. Legs, arms," Gloria said and repressed a convulsive shudder.

"I think I get the picture," Merrit said. "It came to the village and caught several of its inhabitants. Most of the others ran from it but there were some who stayed and fought it. That's where the spears come in. They fought it and killed it. But in the terror and fear that this horrible thing had others of its like near, they ran also. Hang it! I wish we'd come sooner. I'd have liked a close examination of the thing."

And, as though in answer, Gloria's voice rose in a scream that had had its counterpart in the cabin of their plane. More it was for the same reason. Merrit whirled and saw where her terror was born in.

LUMBERING toward them on its six legs, was the largest spider Merrit ever saw or wanted to see. It stood ten feet high and the top joint of its legs rose another foot above the furry head. The weight of it must have been tremendous because for all of its legs, it wasn't coming very fast. Two antenna-like projections waved back and forth toward each other from either side of and just above the saucer-shaped eyes. Merrit would have sworn the sound he heard did not come from the creature's mouth, when he heard:

"Do not run! There is nothing to fear. . . ."

Maybe there isn't, Merrit thought as he turned and grabbed Gloria's arm and started for the cool, green depths of the jungle, but I'm not staying to find out. He turned for a last look, and redoubled his speed. A slender string of waxy stuff had shot out from the spider, like the line from a fishing reel, and was falling toward them in a short arc. Had he and the girl delayed for a single second, they would have been trapped in the first strand of the web.

The jungle enfolded them in its embrace. But though they used all their strength in just running, their efforts seemed to no avail. The spider had more legs and better means of travel. For all its weight it could use the trees as stepping stones. And once more the slime and tangled underbrush sapped the strength of the two humans as it had done the afternoon before.

"I'm beat out," Gloria gasped after a while. She stumbled as she said it, and Merrit had to grab her quickly before she fell.

His teeth sank into his lower lip and drew blood so sharply did he bite. There had to be a way of getting out of this, he thought. There were crashing sounds behind him, and shouted words. He lifted his head and listened.

"Hoab! Sanor! Gaitha! This way. . . ."

HE TURNED this way and that trying to find a way out. He whirled toward a sudden movement in the brush close by, whipped out his gun and blazed away at the sound. Before their startled eyes a jaguar broke and ran past them. Merrit's mind worked with the speed of light.

"Quick, honey," he bent and whispered to the girl. "Under this bush."

He dragged her forward toward it and nestled by her side. They weren't an instant too soon.

From a direction at right angles to the path they had been following came another of the spiders, and from ahead came a shout:

"In the web, Gaitha. A prisoner."

The spider lumbered toward the hidden voice and following it came another but this one from the same direction the humans had come from. This one lumbered off after its counterpart.

Gloria started to speak but Merrit placed a cautioning finger against her

lips. He removed it after a second and used his hands in sign talk. Placing the tip of his index finger to his lips first, then to his ears, he shook his head as though saying they could not hear. Then putting it against his nose he shook his head to show the creatures had no sense of smell. Then pointing to himself and the girl, he placed his finger against his lips in a sign that they should hold silence.

Suddenly from ahead came a series of wild roars. Mixed with it were other sounds, screams and sounds of rage or pain. For a few seconds the cacophony of sound came to them, then silence descended on the jungle.

They waited as patiently as they could, straining their ears for some sign to show either the coming or departure of the things, but all they heard were the calls of birds, and the buzzing sounds of winged insects. But though Gloria tired soon of their cramped position, Merrit held her close until he thought they could venture forth with some degree of safety.

And even with their first steps, Merrit brought his head close and whispered in low tones:

"Step carefully. Make for the river bank. Somewhere along its length we should find another village."

Merrit had not lost his sense of direction. Moving carefully, he and the girl edged along a faintly etched trail toward the water. Nor was he wrong. It wasn't more than a few minutes later that they reached the muddy, curving banks. But here they were faced with a new terror. Literally millions of mosquitos and winged insects attacked them. There was nothing they could do but bow their heads, hold their arms close to their faces and trot along. Soon they began to show the effects of the insect bites. Their faces swelled in dozens of places until they looked as

though they had broken out in aggravated cases of mumps.

In the depths of the forest all had been cool, though damply so. Here, the sun struck the water and reflected in a thousand terrible rays of heat. Unprotected as they were by helmets, the heat soon began to take effect. Merrit kept a close watch on Gloria. She was the weak one. He held her hand, hot and damp with heat and perspiration. Suddenly it went limp and Merrit knew she had about reached the limit of her endurance. His arm went around her and half-carrying, half-lifting her, he managed to stagger toward the green depths of a sheltered nook not far from the edge of the water.

There were several strands of grey-green fibrous branches athwart their path. They looked like streamers sent from the trees. Merrit threw out an arm to cast the nearest aside. Too late to save himself, he realized that these streamers were not floating branches. They were the strands of the web the giant spiders wove. And he and Gloria were now prisoners. They had been outwitted. Nor was their fate far from them. Ahead, coming from the tangled depths of the tree from which the web was being woven, came crawling the terror they had tried so hard to escape. . . .

"HOW goes it now, Moas?" Reet asked.

"As badly as before," the chief engineer said. "I have come to the conclusion that we are stranded. . . ."

Reet's antennae, the means of their communication waved about like the frightened wings of a moth. Sounds which were transposed into words came to the receiving end of Moas' antennae:

"Blast it! Blast it to the devils in Grob's pit! They can't have lost trace of us. . . ."



Merrit grabbed Gloria's arm and started for the tangled jungle . . .

"They haven't. But we have," Moas said. "I mean by that, that though they know where we are, they might not be able to get to us. Unless, of course, the Most High evolves a means."

"I don't understand," Reet said. "We had always managed before."

"It has to do with the atmospheric density. The proportions are different here. Yet the density on the surface of this planet is ideal for our life. Which reminds me. What of these strange beings the scouts have reported finding? Is it true they have a means of flight? Surely then, they have a superior intelligence than those which we have found previously?"

"They have. Their very speech shows it by its complexity and choice of vocabulary. I have ordered they be taken prisoner. If they do not prove to be amenable to our suggestions, we shall have food at least."

"Have any other of our scouts run into the kind of trouble Hutu found?" Moas asked.

"No, blast them!" Reet was infuriated at the thought. "If we could but rise above this land I would blast them from the face of this planet."

"I think the Most High might have such plans, that is if a general landing proves feasible. Of course, being out of communication with the mother ship,



... there were cracking sounds behind, and shouted words

we can only speculate about their activities."

Suddenly Reet's antennae stood stiffly erect away from his head. Moas knew that he was receiving messages from the scouts sent out a while before. He waited patiently for the messages to come to an end.

"They have captured the two," Reet said exultantly. "It shouldn't be long and we can see and hear these odd creatures."

"Good! Do not forget to call me," Moas said.

"Don't worry about that," Reet said. "You just get the engine to function. . . ."

"WE DON'T have too much time left, sir," Harrison said.

Frederick Ward looked at the sky, peering through eyes slitted against the still strong light of the dying sun and said:

"Still two hours. Hang it! They just couldn't have disappeared as though in a void. Surely there must be some trace, some small part of their plane. . . . H'mm! Harrison!"

"Yes, sir?"

"Set the 'copter down there. At the edge of the jungle near those twin plantains. . . ."

The helicopter landed with the smoothness of its kind, without a jar

to disturb in the slightest, the equilibrium of its passengers. The cabin door opened and Ward alighted. Sticking his head back in he said:

"Break out those high-powered carbines we brought. Also the machetes. Don't forget the anti-malaria toxin."

He backed away as his assistant came through after him. Ward and Harrison made sure their pistols were ready for instant action, threw the carbines over their shoulders by the slings, took up the machetes, and started hacking their way into the jungle.

"If you don't mind my asking, sir," Harrison said as he followed the other, "why did you want me to land here?"

"There is a village I want to look at," Ward replied. "I saw something strange about it from the air. Thank goodness we were able to hover over it. I think you were looking at something else at the time, but I saw a heap of something on the ground which interested me. From the air I'd swear that peculiar shape was the skeleton form of a gigantic spider."

Harrison gave his superior a peculiar look of disapproval. Gigantic spiders! Harrison knew Ward was probably the world's most famous entomologist. But spiders the size of elephants. Shades of Jonathan Swift! Still shaking his head at the foolishness of the other, Harrison continued to follow.

It took them perhaps ten minutes of work to reach the village. Before venturing into it they slung the carbines down for instant use if necessary.

"I'll go first," Ward said. "You cover me. Shoot at the first sign of anything suspicious."

"Right, sir."

Ward stalked straight down the center of the village. Behind him, Harrison ran from hut to hut, always managing to keep the other in sight. At last Ward reached the area where he

had spotted the skeleton. Turning, he waved for Harrison to come up. Together, they stood and looked at the thing.

"See," Ward said pointing. "Those forelegs. Four of them. Walking legs. And the rear ones; they are spinning legs. But of bone. And look at the skull, bony, large, with brain capacity. These creatures have the wherewithal to think. The thing must have been ten feet high with a spread of perhaps twenty feet between its legs. Unbelievable. . . ."

The dying rays of the sun struck a sliver of glittering light from something on the ground. Ward, still lost in the skeleton of the spider, did not see it. But Harrison did. He stooped and picked the object up.

"Sir! Sir," he shouted excitedly. "Look at this. . . ."

Ward turned and peered down at the object in Harrison's palm. It was an empty cartridge case.

"From one of those new, high-powered automatic pistols, the ones which eject empty shells. Hyland and Miss Grahame must have been here."

"You're right. Of course you're right," Ward said quietly. "Let's go through these huts. Perhaps they left some sign of their visit."

THEY found it in the hut where Hyland and Gloria had spent the night. Gloria had managed to mend her torn blouse as best she could by tearing strips from the torn part and binding her breast with them. She had torn a part of the collar off. It was this part which they found. It was the proof they needed. For on it was a tag which bore the inscription, Marshall Field and Company, Chicago.

"We'll circle the village," Ward said as they came out of the hut. "Hyland and the girl wore boots. These natives

wear sandals or go bare-footed. The ground is soft and their prints should show up. . . . You go down along the river bank. They might have headed for it thinking to follow it."

But it was Ward who spied the indentations of their boots. He also saw the tracks of something else and instantly identified the markings.

"God!" he whispered hoarsely at sight of the huge, characterless imprints. "One of those things was after them." He called Harrison to his side and the two stood for a second, looking down at the ground.

"See," Harrison said pointing. "They were running. Right into the jungle. . . ."

Ward's lips pressed firmly together. There were but two alternatives. Either go back to the helicopter and fly for help, or go into the jungle after them. Ward made up his mind on the instant.

"All right, Harrison," he said. "I'm going in. Coming?"

"Yes, sir," came the immediate reply.

They lost the tracks the instant they entered the brush. But the path wasn't hard to follow, because, due to the size of the spider, it had ripped through the brush. But after a half hour's tracking Ward and the other came to an impasse. Ahead of them was what looked to be a net of something stretched out directly across their path. There was something hanging in the net.

"Look sir," Harrison pointed. "It's a jaguar, or what's left of him. Those spiders must have laid the net right across the trail and the beast ran straight into it."

"So they're flesh eaters," Ward said. "H'm. Let's stop a second and reason this out. Obviously the spider who was after Merrit and the girl was not the one who spun this web. If he were that swift to be able to get ahead of them,

then he was also swift enough to have caught them.

"Now. To reason this out we've got to use all the facts. So we go back to the first fact, that a native saw a circular ship fall from the sky and from it emerged giant spiders. Which fact brings out this conclusion. That the spiders can think and have some means of communication. From this we can deduce that there were more than one of the creatures on the loose. And from there we can assume that the first, spotting Merrit and the girl gave chase, and warned his fellows what had happened. Now I'll wager my life that we will find similar webs hanging to either side of this path. I'll strike off to the right for a short distance and you go left. Five minutes should prove my contention. We'll meet here. . . ."

Ward was proven right.

But Harrison had something else on his mind.

"Maybe we ought to be turning back, sir. I don't think we have too much of daylight left."

Ward thought for a few seconds, then said:

"I guess so. We still have better than an hour. I hate to give up, though, especially when we've found that they're not far off. And worse, that they're in danger. Tell you what. Let's strike off toward the river. Merrit is both clever and quick-witted. Perhaps. . . . Another half hour will still give us time. . . ."

MERRIT whirled and, shoving Gloria ahead of him, started to run. But this time it was too late. The slender coil spun out toward them and encircled them both. Another came down and still another. Somehow, Merrit managed to keep his right hand free. But the girl was bound tightly to him. She smiled up at him and all

fear was wiped from her face.

He bent and kissed her, quickly and hard.

"Looks like this is it, honey," he said.

There was the slightly metallic sound of the spider's voice calling to his companions:

"I have them."

As though they were at the end of a pulley, Merrit and the girl were drawn upward. By the time they reached the spider they were wrapped as though in a cocoon. Everything but Merrit's right arm.

The huge eyes examined them closely as they came up the web. There was nothing of anything human in their depths. They were cold and expressionless as a pair of stones. There was a flash of motion from two of the spinning legs and the cocoon was cut free. Then, bearing his prisoners aloft, the spider scurried down the web. He waited for his companions. There were three of them.

Their antennae waved wildly in a cross current of talk:

"Good! Reet will be pleased. . . ."

"Yes," said another. "And so will the Most High. . . ."

Their captor exulted:

"Perhaps I will be made one of the Lesser Legion. . . .?"

"Ho, Hutu! Glory will be yours for this."

"Let us return, then," the one called Hutu said.

It was then Merrit acted. His right arm was free. The instant the strand began to entwine about them he had whipped out his pistol. There was but one thing to do. The three companions of Hutu stepped into the lead. Hutu was some twenty feet behind them as they started back to their ship. Perhaps the double load was a little too much for the spider but after a hundred yards, he was fifty feet behind.

Merrit raised the pistol and took careful aim downward at one of the huge eyes and pulled the trigger. A great gush of odorous ooze shot out of the hole which appeared in the spider's head. It was black in color and it drenched the man and girl in its vile flow. Once more the pistol roared and the other eye fountained in black slime.

Hutu collapsed to the ground. But before he did he dropped his precious bundle. The shots brought the other three on the run. They looked at the body of their companion, then began to scurry around looking for Merrit and the girl. The two had fallen into a tangled mess of moss. Before the other spiders got to the scene Merrit had somehow managed to burrow deep into it. He suspected that because of their height the spiders could not see much of what lay on the ground. He was right. But he hadn't planned on their ingenuity.

The instant they realized their prey was gone, they began a systematic burrowing with their four walking legs. Up and down in narrowing furrows they marched. Back and forth, ever drawing closer to the human cocoon they came. All that was to be seen of the two humans was Merrit's extended arm with the pistol stuck out.

Gloria had been trying desperately to free herself of the slimy coil. She had to give up with a moan of despair.

"I can't. It's so sticky, Mer," she whispered.

"I know. I tried before. Looks like this is really it. The way they're going about it, it won't take more than a couple of minutes before they find us."

BUT Merrit was wrong. It seemed impossible that thorough as they were, that they should pass them by. But time and time again, sometimes when they were right on top of the



They ran frantically toward the helicopter

two, but always something either distracted them, or the marching feet just missed. If there was one thing they possessed, it was patience. Time went by sluggishly. The forest grew dark and still the spiders marched their patrol. All movement had died in Merrit. Now and then he would flex his fingers slightly. If circulation stopped in that arm Merrit knew nothing could help them.

All would have been well had not one of the spiders kicked against the bundle deep in the brush. The silence was shattered then by the roaring sound of Merrit's gun. Once, twice, and twice again it went off and each time he fired there was a roar of pain from one or another of the spiders. But he wasn't as lucky as he had been with Hutu.

Either his aim was bad or the time he had lain there had closed circulation enough to make firing difficult, but whatever the reason, Merrit didn't hit a spot to bring death to them.

Save one shell, Merrit thought as he counted the shots. Two. One for her and one for me. Six, he counted, then turned, and looked down at the girl. She read what was on his mind.

"Love came a little late, didn't it, dearest?" she said.

"I was blind," he said.

"It doesn't matter now," she said, smiled, closed her eyes and said, "All right, sweetheart."

He bent his wrist inward toward her breast, breathed a silent prayer and pulled the trigger. Nothing happened but an empty clicking sound. Merrit had forgotten the two shots he had used in the forest.

"There are no more shells," he said with something akin to panic in his voice.

The girl looked past his shoulder.

"Oh, Mer, honey. They're coming again."

The spiders had retreated from the hail of fire. Now, they came forward again. Straight for the bundle on the ground. The sound of their mandibles working was the most terrible the two humans had ever heard. Closer and closer and at last directly above them. They closed their eyes and waited.

There was an interval of silence, as though the whole forest awaited the end of the tragedy. The end was unexpected.

Instead of the crushing sound of the mandibles closing on their defenseless bodies, Merrit and the girl heard the spanging sound of high-powered rifle fire. And once more there were the loud shrieks of pain from the spiders. The rifle fire was steady and continuous for several seconds. When it was over silence descended on the jungle again.

"Ward! Ward," Merrit shouted. "Here, man. . . ."

Gloria sank into a quivering crying bundle on the ground at her release. Merrit knelt at her side, placed his arms about her and comforted her as best he could. Ward and Harrison stood above them and marveled that they had found them. They had, in fact, started on their way back to the helicopter when they heard the shots. Orienting themselves, they dashed wildly in the direction of the firing. They arrived in the nick of time.

"Do you think. . . . But you both have to manage it somehow," Ward broke in on the tableau. "Another twenty minutes and we won't be able to see our hands in front of our faces. Let's go."

MERRIT and Harrison supported Gloria. Stumbling in a wild run, the four raced for the spot where Ward and Harrison had the helicopter. Through the deserted village, past the mouldering carcass of the spider, into

the jungle again, they ran. But the shadows were falling fast, faster than they could run. The ascending moon was already casting its own shadows. And still they ran on. For in their breasts was a common fear. That they hadn't seen the last of the spiders and that there might be others lurking in the jungle paths.

They were drenched with perspiration, winded and staggering when they reached the open and saw the silver shape of the helicopter ahead of them. Gloria was crying with gladness when she saw it.

"Let's take it easy for a second," Merrit gasped. "I'm just about done in."

It wasn't Merrit's word which gave them pause. It was a droning sound from above. They looked up and saw an immense circular shape above them. Streamers of flame swept from exhausts strung along the hull of the strange ship. It moved silently in the heavens, a saucer-like plane. They watched it swing toward the eastern horizon and disappear from sight.

"What was it?" Gloria asked fearfully.

They did not answer her but looked fearfully at each other. . . .

THE mother ship seemed to hang suspended from the sky. Suddenly a string of cables shot out from it. And in a few seconds a number of creatures began to descend.

They reached the ground, formed into two squads, and with the largest of them at their head, marched off toward the huge circular shape not far off. Reaching it, they clambered aboard and disappeared into an open port on the topside.

Reet and the balance of his crew were lined up at attention. Their antennae stood erect as if in salute. The

squads deployed to form lines opposite those awaiting them. The immense spider marched to the center and turned his grotesque body to face Reet and the others.

"Moas is an excellent mechanic," the monster said.

"It is true, Most High," Reet said.

"A better mechanic than you are a commander, Reet," the Most High said. "I have full details of what transpired here. My engineers tell me that this planet has a sufficiency of what we need to carry on our lives here. We left Roas because it was a dying planet. . . ."

Reet's cold, unemotional eyes watched the waving antennae of the Most High without a quiver in their depths.

" . . . I did not bring us across the great voids of space to find graves on this planet. Death was more welcome there. I commanded you to use discretion when the ship fell, disabled. Capture, do not kill. Investigate, plot out the land. . . . Instead, you bungled badly. Gaitha, Hutu, and others whom I needed are dead because of that bungling. You knew these strangers had space ships. You knew then they were of a high intelligence. Surely you must have known they possessed means of warfare. But you sent Hutu and the others out, unarmed except with the means nature gave us. So they died. . . .

"Very well, then. The rest of you will be brought to the mother ship. All but Reet. He will remain here. It will be his duty to place the explosives in the proper places. And set them off. . . ."

THE helicopter rose straight upward into the deep blue night. They were cramped for space inside but they managed by having Gloria sit on Merrit Hyland's lap.

"Back to Villa Hermosa?" Harrison said. He was at the controls.

"Wait," Merrit said.

They looked at him. He went on: "Their ship, the one which crashed, can't be far off. Let's take a look at it."

"A commendable suggestion," Ward said. "The true scientist. He just escapes from what might have been a fate worse than death and wants to walk back into the jaws of the tiger again to see how long its fangs are. Sorry, my boy. We're going back. After we get back to Mexico City then we'll do something about it."

Merrit started to say something but the girl reached around and placed a finger on his lips.

"Darling," she said. "It's taken me years to make you say the things I've been wanting to hear. I want to keep hearing them. Ooh! What was that . . .?"

The heavens had suddenly lit up with a light that turned night to day. The brilliance lasted for ten seconds. Then dimly to their ears came the sustained roar of a terrific explosion. And just before the light died they all saw it. A streak of something silvery passed

across their line of vision and vanished into the heavens. It was moving with the speed of light. Tiny flashes of orange flame licked from its sides.

"By George!" Merrit said. "They blew up their crashed ship. . . ."

"They must have landed others who were sent for the sole purpose of destroying it."

"And destroying our proof," Merrit said.

"What about the spiders that were killed?" Gloria asked.

"The tropic air, the vermin, insects, and other destroyers will take care of them. There won't be a shred left of them. Not a shred," Ward said. "And speaking of insects. I'd say the mosquitoes had a holiday with you two. Better take some of that toxin."

"The only bug I worry about," Gloria said as she bared her arm, "is the love bug. I'm glad there's no toxin for that."

For once Merrit's kiss held no life. He was thinking, is this the end? Have we seen the last of them . . .?

THE END

RUBBER SPACE

By CHARLES RECOUR

SOME time ago in these pages of *AMAZING STORIES*, an article by "Queen's Knight" on the nature of four-dimensional space appeared. It was interesting and provocative, and it was one of the many attempts that have been made to explain the nature of the fourth dimension. However, it was concerned primarily with the mathematical fourth dimension, not the temporal one. And there is a distinct difference. "Queen's Knight" did an excellent job of explaining the whole business of the mathematical fourth dimension but of course he made no attempt to really picture it. It is doubtful—no, it is truly impossible—to imagine the fourth dimension—but a good explanation of the methods used to describe it were given.

Zero dimension was shown to be a point. A single line was shown to be a one-dimensional continuum or a one-dimensional "space." Two non-coinciding lines were shown to form a two-

dimensional space, and of course, three non-coinciding lines, all at angles with each other were shown to form our three dimensional continuum. By logical extension, the addition of a fourth non-coinciding line at right angles to the other three, was shown to form our "fourth-dimensional" space. The only question then, is how to actually visualize four lines, all at right angles to each other. Is this possible? No, of course not. Our minds do not permit us to see a physical image of this. But by considering the extension of the other spaces—one, two and three—and by using lavishly various analogies, we can get a pretty good idea of some of the things that must occur in such an hypothetical space. This has been elaborately considered and described many times.

For example, it is pointed out that in a four dimensional space it would be possible to remove things from a refrigerator without opening the door, just as in a three-dimensional space we can