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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE TERROR FROM THE DEPTHS ***

The Terror from the Depths

By Sewell Peaslee Wright

Commander John Hanson challenges an appalling denizen of the watery world Hydrot.

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His head reared itself from the ground.

"Good afternoon, sir," nodded Correy as I entered the navigating room. He glanced down at the two glowing three-dimensional navigating charts, and drummed restlessly on the heavy frames.

"Afternoon, Mr. Correy. Anything of interest to report?"

"Not a thing, sir!" growled my fire-eating first officer. "I'm about ready to quit the Service and get a job on one of the passenger liners, just on the off chance that something exciting might eventually happen."

"You were born a few centuries too late," I chuckled. Correy loved a fight more than any man I ever knew. "The Universe has become pretty well quieted down."

"Oh, it isn't that; it's just this infernal routine. Just one routine patrol after another; they should call it the Routine Patrol Service. That's what the silver-sleeves at the Base are making of it, sir."

At the moment, Correy meant every word he said. Even old-timers develop cases of nerves, now

and then, on long tours of duty in small ships like the *Ertak*. Particularly men like Correy, whose bodies crave physical action.

There wasn't much opportunity for physical activity on the *Ertak*; she was primarily a fighting ship, small and fast, with every inch of space devoted to some utilitarian use. I knew just how Correy felt, because I'd felt the same way a great many times. I was young, then, one of the youngest commanders the Special Patrol Service had ever had, and I recognized Correy's symptoms in a twinkling.

"We'll be re-outfitting at the Arpan sub-base in a couple of days," I said carelessly. "Give us a chance to stretch our legs. Have you seen anything of the liner that spoke to us yesterday?" I was just making conversation, to get his mind out of its unhealthy channel.

"The *Kabit*? Yes, sir; we passed her early this morning, lumbering along like the big fat pig that she is." A pig, I should explain, is a food animal of Earth; a fat and ill-looking creature of low intelligence. "The old *Ertak* went by her as though she were standing still. She'll be a week and more arriving at Arpan. Look: you can just barely make her out on the charts."

I glanced down at the twin charts Correy had indicated. In the center of each the red spark that represented the *Ertak* glowed like a coal of fire; all around were the green pinpricks of light that showed the position of other bodies around us. The *Kabit*, while comparatively close, was just barely visible; her bulk was so small that it only faintly activated the super-radio reflex plates upon the ship's hull.

"We're showing her a pretty pair of heels," I nodded, studying our position in both dimensions. "Arpan isn't registering yet, I see. Who's this over here; Hydrot?"

"Right, sir," replied Correy. "Most useless world in the Universe, I guess. No good even for an emergency base."

"She's not very valuable, certainly," I admitted. "Just a ball of water whirling through space. But she does serve one good purpose; she's a sign-post it's impossible to mistake." Idly, I picked up Hydrot in the television disk, gradually increasing the size of the image until I had her full in the field, at maximum magnification.

Hydrot was a sizable sphere, somewhat larger than Earth—my natural standard of comparison—and utterly devoid of visible land. She was, as I had said, just a ball of water, swinging along uselessly through space, although no doubt there was land of some kind under that vast, unending stretch of gray water, for various observers had reported, in times past, bursts of volcanic steam issuing from the water.

Indeed, as I looked, I saw one such jet of steam, shooting into space from a spot not far from the equator of the strange world. In the television disk, it looked like a tiny wisp of white, barely visible against the gray water, but in reality it must have been a mighty roaring column of smoke and steam and erupted material.

"There's life in the old girl, anyway," I commented, indicating the image in the disk. "See her spout?"

We bent over the disk together, watching the white feather of steam.

"First time I've ever seen that," said Correy. "I know volcanic activity has been reported before, but—look, sir! There's another—two more!"

Undoubtedly, things were happening deep in the bowels of Hydrot. There were now three wisps of steam rising from the water, two of them fairly close together, the other a considerable distance away, arranged to form a very long pointed triangle, the short base of which ran close to the equator, its longer sides reaching toward one of the poles; the north pole, as we happened to view the image.

The columns of steam seemed to increase in size. Certainly they mounted higher into the air. I could imagine the terrific roar of them as they blasted their way through the sullen water and hurled it in steaming spray around their bases, while huge stones fell hissing into the water on all sides. The eruption must have shaken the entire sphere; the gushing of those vomiting throats was a cataclysm of such magnitude that I could not guess its effect.

Correy and I watched tensely, hardly breathing. I think we both felt that something was about to happen: a pent-up force had been released, and it was raging. We could almost hear the rumble of the volcanic explosions and the ear-splitting hiss of the escaping steam.

Suddenly Correy clutched my arm.

"Look!" he whispered, "*Look!*"

I nodded, not trusting myself to speak. I could see the water crawling inside the triangle formed by the three wisps of steam: crawling in white, foaming waves like tiny scraps of thread as it rushed headlong, in mighty tidal waves, away from the center of that triangle.

The columns of steam flared up with fresh strength, darkening as though with smoke. Here and

there within the triangle black specks appeared, grew larger, and ran together in crooked lines that widened continually.

"A—a new continent, sir!" said Correy almost reverently. "We've seen a new continent born."

Correy had put my thoughts into words. We had seen a new continent born; on the gray surface of Hydrot there was now a great irregular black blotch from which mounted three waving pillars of smoke and steam. Around the shores of the new continent the waters raged, white and angry, and little threads of white crawled outward from those shores—the crests of tidal waves that must have towered into the air twice the *Ertak's* length.

Slowly, the shore-line changed form as fresh portions arose, and others, newly-risen, sank again beneath the gray water. The wisps of steam darkened still more, and seemed to shrivel up, as though the fires that fed them had been exhausted by the travail of a new continent.

"Think, sir," breathed Correy, "what we might find if we landed there on that new continent, still dripping with the water from which it sprang! A part of the ocean's bed, thrust above the surface to be examined at will—Couldn't we leave our course long enough to—to look her over?"

I confess I was tempted. Young John Hanson, Commander of the Special Patrol ship, *Ertak*, had his good share of natural curiosity, the spirit of adventure, and the explorer's urge. But at the same time, the Service has a discipline that is as rigid and relentless as the passing of time itself.

Hydrot lay off to starboard of our course: Arpan, where we were to re-outfit, was ahead and to port, and we were already swinging in that direction. The *Ertak* was working on a close schedule that gave us no latitude.

"I'm afraid it can't be done, Mr. Correy," I said, shaking my head. "We'll report it immediately, of course, and perhaps we'll get orders to make an investigation. In that case—"

"Not the *Ertak*!" interrupted Correy passionately. "They'll send a crew of bug-eyed scientists there, and a score or so of laboratory men to analyze this, and run a test on that, and the whole mess of them will write millions of words apiece about the expedition that nobody will ever read. I know."

"Well, we'll hope you're wrong." I said, knowing in my heart that he was perfectly right. "Keep her on her present course, Mr. Correy."

"Present course it is, sir!" snapped Correy. Then we bent together over the old-fashioned hooded television disk staring down silently and regretfully at the continent we had seen born, and which, with all its promise of interest and adventure, we must leave behind, in favor of a routine stop at the sub-base on Arpan.

I think both of us would have gladly given years of our lives to turn the *Ertak's* blunt nose toward Hydrot, but we had our orders, and in the Service as it was in those days, an officer did not question his orders.

Correy mooned around the Arpan sub-base like a fractious child. Kincaide and I endeavored to cheer him up, and Hendricks, the *Ertak's* young third officer, tried in vain to induce Correy to take in the sights.

"All I want to know," Correy insisted, "is whether there's any change in orders. You got the news through to Base, didn't you, sir?"

"Right. All that came back was the usual 'Confirmed.' No comment." Correy muttered under his breath and wandered off to glare at the Arpanians who were working on the *Ertak*. Kincaide shrugged and shook his head.

"He's spoiling for action, sir," he commented. Kincaide was my second officer; a cool-headed, quick-witted fighting man, and as fine an officer as ever wore the blue-and-silver uniform of the Service. "I only hope—message for you, sir." He indicated an Arpanian orderly who had come up from behind, and was standing at attention.

"You're wanted immediately in the radio room, sir," said the orderly, saluting.

"Very well," I nodded, returning the salute and glancing at Kincaide. "Perhaps we will get a change in orders after all."

I hurried after the orderly, following him down the broad corridors of the administration building to the radio room. The commander of the Arpan sub-base was waiting there, talking gravely with the operator.

"Bad news, Commander," he said, as I entered the room. "We've just received a report from the passenger liner *Kabit*, and she's in desperate straits. At the insistence of the passengers, the ship made contact with Hydrot and is unable to leave. She has been attacked by some strange monster, or several of them—the message is badly confused. I thought perhaps you'd like to report the matter to Base yourself."

"Yes. Thank you, sir. Operator, please raise Base immediately!"

The *Kabit*? That was the big liner we had spoken to the day before Correy and I had seen the new continent rise above the boundless waters of Hydrot. I knew the ship; she carried about eighteen hundred passengers, and a crew of seventy-five men and officers. Beside her, the *Ertak* was a pygmy; that the larger ship, so large and powerful, could be in trouble, seemed impossible. Yet—

"Base, sir," said the operator, holding a radio-menore toward me.

I placed the instrument on my head.

"John Hanson, Commander of the Special Patrol ship *Ertak* emanating. Special report for Chief of Command."

"Report, Commander Hanson," emanated the Base operator automatically.

"Word has just been received at Arpan sub-base that passenger liner *Kabit* made contact with Hydrot, landing somewhere on the new continent, previously reported by the *Ertak*. Liner *Kabit* reports itself in serious difficulties, exact nature undetermined, but apparently due to hostile activity from without. Will await instructions."

"Confirmed. Commander Hanson's report will be put through to Chief of Command immediately. Stand by."

I removed the radio-menore, motioning to the operator to resume his watch.

Radio communication in those days was in its infancy. Several persons who have been good enough to comment upon my previous chronicles of the Special Patrol Service, have asked "But, Commander Hanson! Why didn't you just radio for assistance?" forgetting as young persons do, that things have not always been as they are to-day.

The *Ertak's* sending apparatus, for example, could reach out at best no more than a day's journey in any direction, and then only imperfectly. Transmission of thought by radio instead of symbols or words, had been introduced but a few years before I entered the Service. It must be remembered that I am an old, old man, writing of things that happened before most of the present population of the Universe was born—that I am writing of men who, for the larger part, have long since embarked upon the Greatest Adventure.

"Base, sir," said the operator after a moment, and I hastily slipped on the radio-menore.

"Commander John Hanson, standing by," I shot at the operator at Base. "Have you orders?"

"Orders for Captain John Hanson, Commander of the Special Patrol ship *Ertak*," emanated the operator in a sort of mental drone. "Chief of Command directs that the *Ertak* proceed immediately to the scene of the reported difficulty, and take any necessary steps to relieve same. I will repeat the orders," and he droned through them a second time.

"Orders are understood. The results of our operations will be reported to Base as soon as possible." I tore off the radio-menore and hurried from the room, explaining to the sub-base commander as I went.

Correy was standing beside the *Ertak*, talking to Kincaide, and as I approached, they both looked around quickly and hopefully.

"What's up, sir?" asked Correy, reading news in my face. "A change in orders?"

"Correct! That big liner, the *Kabit*, landed on Hydrot, and she's in some sort of mysterious trouble. Orders from the Chief himself are to proceed there immediately. Are any men away from the ship on leave?"

"If there are, we can do without them!" shouted Correy. "I'll stand a double watch."

"The crew is on duty, sir," said Kincaide quietly. "Mr. Hendricks is aboard directing the taking on of supplies. We can leave any time you order, sir."

"We leave immediately, gentlemen," I said. "Mr. Correy, will you give the necessary orders?"

"Yes, sir!" grinned Correy, his eyes dancing like a schoolboy's. He was in the navigating room jabbing attention signals and snapping orders into the microphone before Kincaide and I, moving more leisurely, had entered the ship.

Hurting through space at maximum speed, it took us two days, Earth time, to come close enough to Hydrot so that we could locate the unfortunate *Kabit*. She had landed on a level plain near the shore of the new continent, where she lay, just a tiny bright speck, even under the maximum power of our television disk.

"It's an odd thing, sir, that we can't raise her by radio," commented Hendricks, who was on duty.

"Have we tried recently?"

"We've been trying constantly, at intervals of but a few minutes," I replied grimly. "Several times, the operator reports, he has been able to get a muffled and garbled response, utterly unintelligible. He says that the signals sound as though the radio emanation-plates in her outer hull were damaged or grounded. We'll just have to wait until we get there."

"As soon as we are near enough, please make an analysis of her atmosphere, so that we can break out masks, if necessary." Hendricks, while young and rather too impulsive, was a good rough-and-ready scientist, as well as a courageous and dependable officer. "When Mr. Correy relieves you, please inform him that I am taking a watch below, should he need me." Hydrot was looming up in the television disk, and I wished to be rested and ready for action when we landed.

I was awakened by an uncomfortable warmth, and when I glanced at my watch the explanation was obvious. We had penetrated the outer gaseous envelope of the world that had so recently given birth to a continent, and Correy was driving the *Ertak* through at reckless speed.

When I entered the navigating room, Correy glanced up guiltily at the surface-temperature gauge and then hastily saluted.

"We're reducing speed, sir," he said. "Atmosphere is rather denser than I had expected. Hendricks reports the air breathable, with a humidity of one hundred. And—tell me, sir, what do you make of the appearance of the *Kabit* now?"

I bent over the hooded television disk anxiously. The *Kabit* was in the center of the field, and the image was perhaps a third of the disk's diameter in length.

Instead of a tiny bright speck, I could see now the fat bulk of the ship, its bright metal gleaming—but across or around the ship, were broad spiral bands of black or dark green, as sharp as though they had been painted there.

"What are the bands, Mr. Correy?" I asked sharply. "Have you formed any opinion?"

"I have, sir, but I'd rather not offer it at this time," said my first officer gravely. "Look about the ship, in the immediate vicinity, and see if you find anything of interest. My eyes may be playing me tricks."

I glanced curiously at Correy, and then bent my attention on the image in the disk.

It was impossible to make out any details of the background, save that the country round seemed to be fairly level, with great pools of gray water standing here and there, and a litter, as of gigantic, wilted vegetation, spread over everything.

And then, as I looked, it seemed to me that the *Kabit* shifted position slightly. At the same time, the spiral bands seemed to move, and upon the ground around the ship, there was movement also.

I looked up from the disk, feeling Correy's eyes upon me. We stared at each other, neither wishing to speak—hardly daring to speak. There are some things too monstrous to put into words.

"You—you saw it, sir?" asked Correy at last, his voice scarcely more than a whisper.

"I don't know. I think I saw something like a—a snake. Is that what you mean?"

"Yes. Something like a snake. A snake that has wrapped itself around the *Kabit*, holding it helpless ... a serpent..." He gestured helplessly, a sort of horror in his eyes. I think he had convinced himself he had only imagined the serpent, until I had seen the same thing.

"Have you stopped to think, Mr. Correy," I asked slowly, "how long the creature would have to be to wrap itself like that around a liner the size of the *Kabit*? It—it can't be!"

"I know it, sir," nodded Correy. "I know it. And still, I saw it, and you saw it."

"Yes," I muttered. "I saw it. I—I saw it *move*!"

We maintained a speed that kept the surface-temperature gauge dangerously close to maximum permissible reading, and despite the forced ventilation of the ship, we were dripping with perspiration.

Atmospheric speeds are maddeningly low after the reckless, hurtling speed of space travel, but our vaunted scientists haven't yet found a way of eliminating friction, and we had to make the best of it.

With maddening slowness the image in the television disk grew larger and clearer, relentlessly confirming our original conclusion.

The *Kabit* was wrapped in the coils of a mighty serpent; a monster that must have been the height of a man in diameter, and whose length I could not even guess.

Four coils were looped tightly about the *Kabit*, and we could now see the terrible tail of the thing, and its head.

I have always been glad that the details of that ghastly head became visible gradually: viewed suddenly, in full relief, it was a sight that might well have threatened the reason of any man.

The serpent's mouth was lined with a triple row of long, fang-like teeth, tilted gullet-ward at a sharp angle, and the breathing holes were elevated to form warty excrescences near the end of the snoutish upper jaw. Long colorless tentacles fringed the horrible mouth: barbels that writhed incessantly, as though they sought food for the rapacious jaws they guarded. From a point slightly above and to the rear of the tiny, ruby eyes, two slim and graceful antennae, iridescent and incongruously beautiful, rose twice the height of a man. Like the antennae of a butterfly, they were surmounted by tiny knobs, and were in constant motion.

The whole head was armored with great plates or scales, dark green in color; and apparently of tremendous thickness. A short distance behind the head were two tremendous reddish-brown fins, with strong supporting spines that seemed to terminate in retractile claws. In the water, these fins would undoubtedly be of tremendous value in swimming and in fighting, but on land they seemed rather useless. Aside from a rudimentary dorsal fin, a series of black, stubby spines, connected by a barely visible webbing, the thing had no other external evidences of its marine origin.

"You've been restless for action, Mr. Correy," I commented grimly. "I believe this chap will give us all you could desire."

Correy, still staring down into the disk, fascinated by the terrible details there, shook his head.

"It shouldn't be such a stiff battle, sir," he said. "The ray will make quick work of him once we're within distance."

"Yes—and of the *Kabit* and all on board," I reminded him. "If he has the strength his size would indicate, he would crush the liner in his death agonies, or, failing that, would heave it about so violently that those within would be maimed or killed outright. This is a case for cunning, and not might."

"I think, sir, both cunning and might will be needed," said Correy soberly, looking up from the disk. "Cunning alone will not dispose of that lad. Have you any plans?"

"Rough plans only; we'll have to develop them as we go along. We don't know what we'll be up against. We'll land a safe distance away, and a small expeditionary force will attack as it sees fit; probably, dividing itself into two or three units. The *Ertak* will be manned by a skeleton crew and ready to take any necessary action to protect itself or, if possible, to aid any of the expeditionary parties."

"What weapons, sir?" asked Correy, his eyes gleaming. "I'll give the orders now!"

"It's too soon for that; it'll be an hour at least before we land. But I believe every man, including officers, should be armed with pistols, at least six atomic bombs, and there should be a field disintegrator-ray unit for each party. And each member must be equipped with a menore; communication will be by menore only. You might call Mr. Kincaide and Mr. Hendricks, and we'll hold a little council of war."

"Right, sir!" said Correy, and picked up the microphone. Kincaide and Hendricks were in the room almost within the minute.

We laid our plans as best we could, but they weren't very definite. Only a few things were certain.

Somehow, we must induce the monster to release his grasp on the *Kabit*. We could take no action against the serpent until the big liner and her passengers were safe. It was a desperate mission; an enterprise not of the *Ertak*, but of individuals.

"One thing is certain, sir," commented Correy, taking over by visual navigation, and reducing speed still more, "you must remain in charge of the ship. You will be needed—"

"I understand your motives, Mr. Correy," I interrupted, "but I do not agree with you. As Commander of the *Ertak*, I shall command the activities of her men. You will have charge of one landing force, and Mr. Hendricks of another. You, Mr. Kincaide, I shall ask to remain in charge of the ship."

"Very well, sir," nodded Kincaide, swallowing his disappointment. I should have liked to have Kincaide with me, for he was level-headed and cool in an emergency—but it was because of these very things that I wanted him in charge of the *Ertak*.

"We're close enough now, sir, to select a landing place," put in Correy. "There's a likely spot, a safe distance away and apparently level, almost on the shore. Shall I set her down there?"

"Use your own judgment, Mr. Correy. You may order the landing force to arm and report at the exit port. As soon as you have made contact, you and Mr. Hendricks will report to me there.

"Mr. Kincaide, you will remain on duty here. I am leaving the conduct of the ship entirely to your judgment, asking you to remember only that the rescue of the *Kabit* and her nearly two thousand souls is the object of this expedition, and the safety of our own personnel cannot be given primary consideration."

"I understand, sir," nodded Kincaide gravely. He held out his hand in that familiar gesture of Earth, which may mean so much more than men ever dare put into words, and we shook hands silently.

There were to be three landing parties of five men and one officer each—eighteen men against a creature that held a mighty passenger liner in its coils!

"I wish, sir, that I were going in your place," said Kincaide softly.

"I know that. But—waiting here will be the hardest job of all. I'm leaving that for you." I turned and hurried out of the room, to make my entries in the log—perhaps my last entries—and secure my equipment.

There are times, in setting down these old tales of the Special Patrol Service as it was before they tacked a "Retired" after my name and title, that I wish I had been a bit more studious during my youth. I find myself in need of words, and possessed only of memories.

I wish I could think of words that would describe the sight that confronted us when we emerged from the *Ertak* and set foot upon the soil of that newly-born continent of Hydrot, but I find I cannot. I have tried many times, and I find my descriptions fall far short of the picture I still carry in my mind.

The ground was a vast littered floor of wilted marine growths, some already rotting away, while others, more hardy, or with roots reaching into as yet undried ooze, retained a sort of freshness. Crab-like creatures scuttled in all directions, apparently feasting upon the plentiful carrion. The stench was terrible, almost overpowering at first, but after a few minutes we became accustomed to it, and, in the intensity of the work we had undertaken, it was forgotten.

Progress was not possible on the ground. Sheltered from the sun by the thick growths it supported, it was still treacherously soft. But the giant marine vegetation that had retained something of its vigor provided a highway, difficult and dangerous and uncertain, but passable.

I remained with the party taking the most direct route to the unfortunate *Kabit*, while Correy and Hendricks led the parties to my left and right, respectively. We kept in constant touch with each other by means of our menores.

"I believe," emanated Correy, "that the beast sees us. I had a good view of him a few seconds back, and his head was elevated and pointed this way."

"It's possible," I replied. "Be careful, however, to do nothing to alarm or excite him. All men must keep under cover, and proceed with as little noise and commotion as possible. I'm going to see, now, if I can get in touch with anyone on the *Kabit*; with full power, communication might be possible even through the *Kabit's* grounded hull."

"It's worth trying," agreed Hendricks. "These new menores are powerful."

I adjusted the little atomic generator to maximum, and replaced the instrument on my head.

"On board the *Kabit*!" I emanated, trying by sheer mental effort to drive the thought over that stinking waste, and through the massive double hull of the liner. "Ahoy the *Kabit*!"

"This is Captain Gole," flashed back the answer instantly. "Captain Gole of the passenger liner *Kabit*. You are from the *Ertak*?"

"Commander Hanson of the *Ertak* emanating. How are conditions on the *Kabit*?"

"Ghastly!" I could sense the feeling in the word, faintly as it smote upon my consciousness. "My officers are keeping the crew under some sort of control, but the passengers are unmanageable. They are frantic—insane with terror. Two or three have already gone mad. I am on the verge of insanity myself. Have you seen the thing that has us trapped?"

"Yes. We are coming to your aid. Tell your passengers to calm themselves. We'll find a way out of this somehow. You know the motto of our Service."

"Yes: '*Nothing Less Than Complete Success*!' I have already issued a bulletin to the effect that I am in contact with your ship. I think it has had a good effect. The clamor is quieting somewhat; you don't know what a terrible strain this has been, sir!"

I could well imagine his mental state. The captain of the *Kabit* was a Zenian, and the Zenians are too high-strung to stand up under a severe strain.

"It may help us if you'll tell us, very briefly, the history of your experience here," I suggested.

"We're going up against something we know nothing about. Perhaps you can give us some valuable information."

"I doubt it, for there's very little to tell. Undoubtedly, you have the report which I managed to get through to Arpan before our radio emanation plates were put out of commission.

"Against my better judgment, we set down here upon the insistence of the passengers. The television instruments revealed nothing more dangerous than the small life in the marine growths left stranded by the receding water.

"I unsealed one of the exit ports, and a small party of the more curious passengers, under the escort of my second officer and six men, ventured forth on a little tour of exploration. A goodly portion of the remaining passengers huddled close to the ship, contenting themselves with souvenir-hunting close by.

"Suddenly there was a great sound of shouting from the exploring party. Not knowing the danger, but realizing that something was wrong, the passengers rushed into the ship. Helplessly, for we are utterly defenseless, I watched the fleeing party of explorers.

"For a moment, I could not see why they fled; I could only see them scrambling desperately toward the ship, and casting frightened glances behind them. Then I saw the thing's head rear itself from the slimy tangle of vegetation, and behind it the wilting growths were lashed to shreds.

"The head drove forward. My second officer, courageously bringing up the rear, was the first victim. Perhaps his bright uniform attracted the beast's attention. I don't know.

"They were close now; very close. I knew that we were in danger, and yet I could not bear to seal the port in the faces of those helpless men racing towards the ship.

"I waited. Twice more the terrible head shot out and both times a man was picked from the fleeing ranks. It was terrible—ghastly.

"The rest of them reached the ship, and as the last man came reeling through the port, the door swung shut and began spinning upon its threads. Almost instantly I gave the order for vertical ascent at emergency speed, but before the order could be obeyed, the ship lurched suddenly, rolled half over, and swung back with a jolt. As the power was applied, the ship rose at a crazy angle, hung there trembling for a moment, and then sank back to the ground. The load was too great. I knew then that we were in the power of the thing that had come wriggling out of that sea of rotting weeds.

"I got the message off to Arpan before our radio emanation plates were grounded or destroyed by the coils of the monster. At intervals, I have tried to pull away, but each time the thing tightens its coils angrily, until the fabric of the ship groans under the strain. We have heard you calling us, faintly and faultily. I have been waiting for you to reach me with the menore. You have come at last, and I am at your orders. If you cannot help us, we are lost, for we shall all go mad."

"We'll have you in the clear very soon," I assured him with a confidence I did not feel. "Stand by for further communications, and—are your generators working?"

"Yes. They're in perfect order. If only the beast would uncoil himself—"

"We'll see to that very shortly. Stand by."

I reduced power and asked Correy and Hendricks if they had both followed the conversation. They had, and had now reduced power, as I had done. We all realized that our counsels might not be reassuring to Captain Gole.

"As I see it, gentlemen, the first thing we must do is to induce the beast to leave the *Kabit*. And the only way that can be accomplished is by—bait."

"Exactly!" snapped Correy. "He's hungry. He knows there's food in the *Kabit*. If we can get him to leave the liner and come after us, the problem's solved."

"But he can run faster than we. I can hardly crawl over this slimy mess," objected Hendricks. "I'm ready to try everything, but remember that we've got to lead him away far enough to make him release the *Kabit*."

"I've got it!" emanated Correy suddenly, his enthusiasm making the vibrations from the menore fairly hammer into my brain. "I'll cut a long, narrow swath with one of the portable disintegrator rays; long enough to take him far away from the *Kabit*, and just wide enough to pass a man. I'll run along this deep groove, just below the reach of the monster. I can make good time; the serpent'll have to slash and wriggle his way over or through this slimy growth. How's that for an idea?"

It was daring enough to have some hope of success, but its dangers were obvious.

"What happens when you reach the end of the path the ray cuts?" I asked grimly.

"You and Hendricks, with your men, will be on both sides of the path, not opposite each other. When he passes, you'll let go your disintegrator rays and the atomic bombs. He'll be in a dozen pieces before we reach the end of the path."

Spread out here before me, in all its wordy detail, it would seem that a long time must have elapsed while Captain Gole related his story, and my officers and myself laid our plans. As a matter of fact, communicating as we were by menore, it was only a minute or so since Correy had emanated his first comment: "I believe the beast sees us. His head was elevated and pointed this way."

And now Hendricks, who was peering over the ruffled edge of an undulating, rubbery leaf of seaweed, turned and waved both arms. Disobeying my strictest orders, he fairly screamed his frantic warning:

"He sees us! He sees us! He's coming!"

I ran up the twisted, concave surface of a giant stem of some kind. To my left, I could hear the shrill whine of Correy's disintegrator ray generator, already in action, and protesting against a maximum load. To the right, Hendricks and his men were scrambling into position. Before me was the enemy.

Slowly, deliberately, as though he did not doubt his terrible ability, he unwrapped his coils from the *Kabit*. His head, with its graceful antennae searching the air, and the tentacles around his mouth writhing hungrily, reared itself ten times a man's height from the ground. His small red eyes flashed like precious stones. Beyond, the mighty greenish coils slashed the rotting weed as he unwrapped them from the *Kabit*.

I snatched off my menore and adjusted it again for maximum power.

"Captain Gole!"

"Yes. What's happening? Tell me! We're rolling and pitching."

"In a moment you'll be free. When I signal 'Rise!' ascend as quickly as possible to a safe distance. Stand by!"

"Hendricks! Be ready to follow Correy's plan. It's our only chance. In a second, now—"

The last coil moved, slipped from the blunt nose of the liner.

"Rise!" I ordered. "*Rise!*"

I saw the ship rock suddenly, and roar hollowly toward the sky. I felt the rush of wind made by her passing.

Then, head still elevated and swaying, the two great reddish-brown fins fanning the air like grotesque wings, the serpent lashed out towards us, coming at amazing speed.

Correy, sure that he was observed by the serpent, leaped down from the huge leaf upon which he had been standing. Hendricks and I, followed by our men, scrambled desperately toward the deep path or lane that Correy's ray had cut through the tangled, stinking growth. Correy's plan had given some promise of success, had we had time to put it into proper operation. As it was, neither Hendricks or I had had time to get into position.

Hendricks, on my right, was working his way as rapidly as possible toward the path, but he had a long way to go. Unless a miracle happened, he would be too late to help. The portable ray machines would be helpless against such a mighty bulk, except at close range.

I reached the path and glanced hastily to the right, the direction, from which the great serpent was sweeping down on us. He was less than the *Ertak's* length away.

"Hide, men!" I ordered. "Under the vegetation—in the muck—anywhere!" I glanced down the lane to the left, and saw, to my relief, that Correy and his men were a goodly distance away, and still far from the end of the swath their ray had cut for them. Then, with the monster towering almost over my head. I darted behind a spongy, spotted growth, listening, above the pounding of my heart, to the rapid slithering of the serpent's ponderous body.

Of a sudden the sound stopped. I was conscious of an excited warning from Hendricks: "He's stopped, sir! *Run!* He's seen you ... he—"

Startled, I glanced up—directly into the hideous face of the snake.

It seemed to me he was grinning. His mouth was partially open, and the pale, writhing barbels that surrounded his mouth seemed to reach out toward me. The long and graceful antennae were

bent downward inquiringly, quivering tensely, and his small eyes glowed like wind-fanned coals of fire. The brownish fins were rigid as metal, the retractile claws unsheathed and cruelly curved. He was so close that I could hear the air rushing through his crater-like breathing holes.

For an instant we stared at each other; he with confident gloating: myself, too startled and horrified to move. Then, as his head shot downward, I leaped aside.

The scaly head raked the clothes from one side of my body, and sent me, sprawling and breathless, into the welter of sagging weeds.

I heard the sharp whine of my ray generator going into action, but I took no chances on the accuracy of my men. They were working under tremendous difficulties. As I fell, I snatched an atomic bomb from my belt, and, as the horrid head drew back to strike again, I threw the bomb with all my strength.

I had thrown from an exceedingly awkward position, and the bomb exploded harmlessly some distance away, showering us with muck and slimy vegetation.

Evidently, however, the explosion startled the serpent, for his head slewed around nervously, and I felt the ground tremble under me as his mighty coils lashed the ground in anger. Scrambling to my feet, I seized the projector tube of the disintegrator ray and swept the beam upward until it beat upon that terrible head.

The thing screamed—a high, thin sound almost past the range of audibility. Reddish dust sifted down around me—the heavy dust of disintegration. In the distance, I could hear the slashing of the tail as it tore through the rubbery growth of weeds.

With half his head eroded by the ray, the serpent struck again, but this time his aim was wild. The mighty head half buried itself in the muck beside me, and I swung the projector tube down so that the full force of the ray tore into the region above and behind the eyes, where I imagined the brain to be. The heavy reddish dust fairly pelted from the ugly head.

Correy had come running back. Dimly, I could hear him shouting.

"Look out!" I warned him. "Keep back, Correy! Keep the men back! I've got him, but he'll die hard —"

As though to prove my words true, the head, a ghastly thing eroded into a shapeless mass, was jerked from the mud, and two tremendous loops of tortured body came hurtling over my head. One of the huge fins swung by like a sail, its hooked talons ripping one of Correy's men into bloody shreds. Correy himself, caught in a desperate endeavor to save the unfortunate man, was knocked twenty feet. For one terrible instant, I thought the beast had killed Correy also.

Gasping, Correy rose to his feet, and I ran to assist him.

"Back, men!" I shouted. "Hendricks! Get away as far and as fast as you can. Back! *Back!*" Half dragging Correy, who was still breathless from the blow, I hurried after the men.

Behind us, shaking the earth in his death agonies, the monstrous serpent beat the plain about him into a veritable sea of slime.

From a point of vantage, atop the *Ertak*, we watched for the end.

"I have never," said Correy in an awed voice, "seen anything take so long to die."

"You have never before," I commented grimly, "seen a snake so large. It took ages to grow that mighty body; it is but natural that, even with the brain disintegrated into dust, the body would not die immediately."

"Undoubtedly he has a highly decentralized nervous system," nodded Hendricks, who was, as I have said, something of a practical scientific man, although no laboratory worker or sniveling scientist. "And instinct is directing him back toward the sea from which, all unwillingly, he came. Look—he's almost in the water."

"I don't care where he goes," said Correy savagely, "so he goes there as carrion. Clark was a good man, sir." Clark was the man the serpent had killed.

"True," I said. Making the entry of that loss would hurt; even though the discipline of the Service is—or at least, used to be—very rigid, officers get rather close to their men during the course of many tours of duty in the confines of a little ship like the *Ertak*. "But the *Kabit*, with her nearly two thousand souls, is safe."

We all looked up. The *Kabit* was no longer visible. Battered, but still space-worthy, she had gone on her way.

"I suppose," grinned Correy, "that we'll be thanked by radio." The grin was real; Correy had had action enough to make him happy for a time. The nervous tension was gone.

"Probably. But—watch our friend! He's in the water at last. I imagine that's the last we'll see of him."

Half of the tremendous body was already in the water, lashing it into white foam. The rest of the great length slid, twitching, down the shore. The water boiled and seethed; dark loops flipped above the surface and disappeared. And then, as though the giant serpent had found peace at last, the waters subsided, and only the wreaths of white foam upon the surface showed where he had sunk to the ooze that had given him birth.

"Finish," I commented. "All that's left is for the scientists to flock here to admire his bones. They'll probably condemn us for ruining his skull. It took them a good many thousand years to find the remains of a sea-serpent on Earth, you remember."

"Some time in the Twenty-second Century, wasn't it, sir?" asked Hendricks. "I think my memory serves me well."

"I wouldn't swear to it. I know that sailors reported them for ages, but that wouldn't do for the laboratory men and the scientists. They had to have the bones right before them, subject to tests and measurements."

That's the trouble with the scientists, I've found. Their ability to believe is atrophied. They can't see beyond their laboratory tables.

Of course, I'm just an old man, and perhaps I'm bitter with the drying sap of age. That's what I've been told. "Old John Hanson" they call me, and smile as if to say that explains everything.

Old? Of course I'm old! But the years behind me are not empty years. I didn't spend them bending over little instruments, or compiling rows of figures.

And I was right about the scientists—they did put in a protest concerning our thoughtlessness in ruining the head of the serpent. They could only estimate the capacity of the brain-pan, argue about the cephalic index, and guess at the frontal angle: it was a terrible blow to science.

Bitter old John Hanson!

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE TERROR FROM THE DEPTHS ***

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