

A Classic Reprint from **AMAZING STORIES**, February, 1938

# *SPAWN of the RAY*

By **MAURICE DUCLOS**

Introduction by Sam Moskowitz

ONE of the most common plot devices in the science fiction pantheon is that of the rapidly reproducing menace which gets out of control and either threatens to, or does succeed in, extinguishing all other forms of life.

As early as its third issue, June, 1926, **AMAZING STORIES** featured just such a story, *The Malignant Entity* by Otis Adelbert Kline, in which a ravenous nucleus of laboratory-created protoplasm escapes, potentially threatening to digest all living things on the earth. The following month, July, 1926, **AMAZING STORIES** featured on the cover *The Eggs From Lake Tanganyika* by Curt Siodmak, in which giant insects get out of control offering obvious danger.

While in most cases the menace was a hungry organic creature, fundamentally an animal, plant or insect, the imagination of science fiction authors expanded beyond these limitations.

A. Merritt in *The Metal Monster* projected a rapidly reproducing metallic life form expanding out of an Asian valley which threatened the world with doom, while John Taine in **AMAZING STORIES QUARTERLY** for Winter, 1930 utilized a rapidly reproducing life-form with a crystalline base originating in China.

Not satisfied with merely exterminating life on earth, the insatiable appetite of Donald Wandrei in his short story *On the Threshold of Eternity* which appeared in his collection *The Eye and The Finger* has the entire universe consumed by a living *Cosmic Dust*!

Nor has the sophistication of modern science fiction and modern writing techniques remained immune to this plot line. Greener *Than You Think* by Ward Moore published in hardcovers by Soane in 1947 deals with the development of super grass that spreads across the earth, crowding out other forms of life. With

open admiration, John Christopher, a British author, grasped Moore's menace to his breast, twisting it so that a disease destroys all grass, thereby endangering all life on the earth in his novel *No Blade of Grass*. The potency of the theme was such that the story was serialized in THE SATURDAY EVENING POST, became a pretty good seller in hard covers and was purchased for a moving picture at \$80,000.

The *Spawn of the Ray* by Maurice Duclos utilizes that very same, time-worn, hoary old plot about a menace getting out of control and threatening all life on the earth. However, what happens to this menace is truly an ingenious twist on an old saw and considering the nature of man more probable than the conclusions of most other authors who have employed the same theme.

WHEN Benny Parker lurched into the Science Club lounge, coughing and talking to no one in particular, the members gaped in unbelieving amazement. For "Bunny," as everyone called him, was even more timid than his nickname implied—and that he should be slightly intoxicated was incredible beyond words. Two smirking individuals entered close behind him. Not fifteen minutes before, they had forcibly dragged Benny into a beer parlor for a drink. But the "beer" they fed him was in reality a potent ale. He had not known the difference until the world began to sway before his eyes and a vast, incredible courage suffused his being. Then he didn't care. At the present moment the two practical jokers were secretly convulsed with laughter as Benny treaded his way about the room, shaking

hands and talking loudly to startled Club members.

As its name signifies, the Science Club was nothing more than a group of persons who had been brought together by their common interest in things of a scientific nature. A laboratory and complete research library were maintained at their clubhouse, which otherwise would have been far too expensive for one individual. It was open at most hours of the day or night, and was frequented by its members when chance permitted. Regular monthly meetings were also held, and nothing less than a major catastrophe could stop the enthusiasts from attending. The present gathering was such a one, but of special interest was their guest of honor, the great Sir Hamilton Hodge. He had graciously consented to say a few words on evolution, a subject



that had brought him world renown.

As is befitting so distinguished a personage, Sir Hodge was late. He arrived half an hour after the appointed time, effectively making the group realize his importance. There followed an introduction by the Club president, characterized by all the ceremony of a launching of some giant of the sea, while the members looked on with awe—except Benny Parker, who was in condition to greet him with shouts and much clapping.

For another half hour the famed scientist lectured on evolution, while his entranced listeners drank in every word. He concluded impressively, as though he might have said the same thing many times before: "And so, my friends, we find that mutation in all manner of life is caused by several things. First; survival of the fittest. Second; by inheritance of favorable characteristics. Third. . ."

AT this moment Benny's voice rose from the back of the room. "Hey, Prof! Don't forget rays—they cause evolution, you know."

The great man allowed his eyes to rest upon the small individual who was swaying on his feet like a tree in a storm. A slight frown of annoyance crossed his brow. "Rays cause evolution?"

"Sure," said Benny. "Cosmic rays, or some invisible radiation from the sun, make things evolve!"

Sir Hodge concealed his irritation. He forced his voice to boom out in hearty laughter. The others in the room were quick to follow suit—though each wondered vaguely what the joke might be. "You have been misinformed, my good man. Rays have nothing to do with evolution. I have just explained why organisms evolve."

But Benny was persistent. "I heard of an experiment where flies were caused to change form in several generations by subjecting them to cathode rays! Isn't that evolution?"

Sir Hodge was angered. Heretofore his theories had been accepted as fact. Now a small town amateur scientist was doubting his word. "I see you don't realize who I am!" he said haughtily.

"Oh, yes I do," replied Benny. "You are Sir Hamilton Hodge, the greatest authority on evolution since Darwin's time. Someone has said you're even greater than Darwin—in fact—I believe you said that yourself!"

For a long moment breathless surprise filled the room. Then a snicker sounded amongst the gathering. Sir Hodge's cheeks slowly turned red. "Never"—he spluttered—"never have I been so insulted!" He turned abruptly and marched from the room.

AFTER that fatal evening Benny Parker rarely dared venture to the Science Club. Whether early in the morning or late at night, there was sure to be someone puttering about in the laboratory or library who would immediately start to joke about "rays" and "evolution." Once he had raised sufficient courage to say that at least cathode rays caused evolution. But only roars of laughter greeted him.

Finally he decided that something should be done about the matter. He would prove his point! If scientists could cause organisms to change, he could do it too! Then all this laughing and joking would have to stop. Immediately he sent a special delivery letter to a large scientific apparatus company in Los Angeles.

One evening when he returned from work he found a package on his door step. It contained the vacuum tube and transformer he had ordered. They were not large, as the standards of such equipment, but nevertheless had neatly deflated his bank account. The vacuum tube had been made to his own design, so he told himself that the exorbitant price was justified. Its special feature was an aluminum "window" that allowed the rays to escape beyond the glass walls. This "window" was strong enough to resist the vacuum, yet numberless mi-

nute spots upon it were only .002 of an inch in diameter, through which the rays passed without hindrance.

Like an eager child Benny hurriedly brought the apparatus into the front room and there connected it for use. Then he began to speculate on what manner of creature would be best to experiment with.

Of all the vast subject of biology there were few things that interested Benny Parker more than FLAGEL-LATA, a microscopic cell that forms green scum in stagnant ponds. It can be classified as neither plant nor animal, for it has characteristics of both. Like a plant it contains chlorophyll, which enables it to manufacture its own food by photosynthesis. Animal-like, it has delicate appendages whose incessant whipping of the water carry it rapidly along. Or, animal-fashion, it may absorb organic food substances through its cell body.

Having some of this green scum in the kitchen where he had been observing it with a microscope, Benny decided that it would be his first subject. He placed a small quantity beneath the "window" of his tube.

BUT sometime during the following hour the flagellate cells failed to survive. Under the microscope he saw that the now

motionless organisms had grown enormously. But at the same time their appearance was one of dryness—despite the fact that they were still in the water. Their green had faded to a pale transparent hue.

He was in high spirits. The cells had perished, of course, but what did that matter if at the same time they had enlarged? It was quite obvious that the trouble was over-exposure to the rays.

**T**HE next batch was left beneath the tube only a few minutes. After an hour interval the process was repeated. Through the lens it was plain to see that they had grown larger than ordinary flagellates. Benny was elated beyond words. He did not know what the outcome of this experiment would be, but he could well imagine the surprise and praise with which the Club would greet him if something noteworthy resulted.

In order that the process might receive no interruption, he attached an automatic, timing device so that the tube would function during the night and while he was at work. The tiny organisms continued to grow!

At this time individual flagellate cells had reached the size of a quarter inch in diameter. It had become necessary to leave only about a score of them in the

wide-mouthed jar. Benny found them consuming more and more food as they grew. He also discovered that the length of time-exposure to the rays was proportionate to their size—the duration increasing with growth.

Even with the unaided eye, infinitely fine thread-like tentacles were visible radiating from the green bodies. But through the microscope the body was transformed into a vast bag of numberless translucent cells. The tiny tentacles were large ropes that propelled it smoothly through the water. Wonder of wonders! Not only had they increased vastly in size, but they had also evolved! It was this evolution—the massing of cells together—that had actually made them grow. From simple organisms he had created complex, specialized creatures!

**W**HEN they were an inch in diameter Benny decided to take them to the Science Club. He smiled as he thought of the amazement they would cause. Then he could laugh at the whole Club—make them eat their words! He put the things into a large fruit jar and started to leave. But then he began to grow doubtful. What if the Club members didn't believe him? They might think he had caught a few jellyfish or obscure sea organisms. No, that would never do.

He must continue the experiment until he had produced something the likes of which had never before been seen. He replaced the things in their container, inwardly cursing himself for lacking nerve.

SO far during the experiment none of the flagellates had multiplied. He removed one to let it live its natural life. It continued to grow till about once again its former size. He waited impatiently to see what would happen. Then one morning he found that it had divided into two living, moving entities. He was somewhat disappointed, for innumerable minute organisms reproduce in exactly the same manner. He destroyed it.

As the space in the jar beneath the vacuum tube became crowded by the flagellates growth, he removed them one by one. Finally only a single survivor of the original flagellates was left. When it had grown to a foot and a half in diameter it was a yellow-green thing with strange little leaf-like projections at one end. Only a few tentacles remained, these being arranged in a horizontal plane around its body. Stranger still, it was showing a tendency to leave the water!

Once, when he returned from work, it was actually out of its

jar and lying on the dining-room table where he kept the tube and equipment. A sudden fear assailed him that it might be dead. But as he reached to pick it up it made an abrupt move as if to avoid him. When he put it back into the water it clung stubbornly to his hand.

"Well! I see where we'll have to make something to put you in!" Benny informed the creature. "Might fall off the table and hurt yourself!"

Thereafter he kept it in a cage covered with window screen. The thing had undergone an amazing metamorphose. It had acquired a fan-like tail of green appendage that looked for all the world like ordinary leaves. Its body was the shape and color of a pine-cone, but of a size slightly over two feet in length. At the smaller end was an organ of three pedal-like membranes which were capable of being opened or closed. Benny knew it was a mouth, for lately the creature had consumed more and more particles of food through this aperture than it had by absorbing them with its body cells, as it had done since its original microscopic size.

AS an experiment he threw a fly into the water in which the thing was half submerged. Immediately the flower-like mouth opened and the insect disappeared within.

"So! You're demonstrating another animal characteristic!" cried Benny in delight. Then a fantastic idea came to him. The monstrosity was as much plant as animal—what then, would be its reaction if some earth were placed near it?

He dared not put the dirt into the water with the thing for fear it might be harmful. Therefore he scattered some on the cage floor near the base of the crock. Almost immediately it came out, moving easily on its six tentacles and looking at first glance like a monstrous spider.

Breathlessly Benny watched it. He had not definitely determined whether it possessed sight or not, but there were several round areas above its mouth that were composed of a red pigment which, he reasoned, might be sensitive to light. It walked surely to the earth. Then Benny was treated to an astonishing sight—a creature eating common soil—and consuming it as if starved!

"Gosh . . . that's incredible!" gasped Benny, trembling with excitement. Still, what was so incredible about it? The thing was part plant, and like a plant it must get certain elements from the earth for body-building.

After that it never went into the water again. It seemed to derive all necessary moisture and minerals from the earth that

Benny fed it each day. Also included in its diet were great numbers of flies, grasshoppers, and even chunks of raw meat, which it seemed to devour with great relish. One peculiarity that Benny noticed with interest was its habit of coughing up the undigestible remains of food it had eaten. This seemed its natural means of elimination, for both earth and meat alike were coughed up after as much nourishment as possible had been taken from them.

Its fare of soil seemed suited to it, for it grew by leaps and bounds. Benny imagined he could almost see it enlarge. Four feet high it stood on its great three-inch thick tentacles. Its large fan-tail of giant leaf-like projections actually touched the top of the cage.

He had long since ceased treating it with the rays. For one thing they could no longer reach all parts of its body simultaneously. Then too, he did not want the flagellate to get larger. As it was it consumed more and more meat, even though that was the smallest part of its diet.

Arising one morning, Benny was surprised to see that his creature had shed its scale-like body covering. This made it look slightly thinner and he could not resist comparing it with a plucked chicken. However, he did not understand why this had

taken place. The brown scales were strewn carelessly over the damp earth on the cage floor. He examined one. It was about an inch in diameter, roughly circular in form, and quite flat. There were symmetrical shapes on it like infinitely fine carvings. He could make out six tentacles folded flat against a body, a tiny perfectly formed fan-tail on the other side . . . in a flash he understood. The thing was a sort of seed, a miniature of its parent! All that was needed to bring it from its quiescent state was water!

Many a time he had taken a bean seed or ordinary peanut apart to examine the plumule—that little fish-shaped growth between the two halves. Well-defined stem and leaves, folded together in a dry little bundle form the plumule. Though inactive, hard, and apparently dead, he knew that the protoplasm of such a seed only awaits favorable conditions for growth to begin. And obviously it was in such a manner that the creature he had treated reproduced itself. He estimated that altogether there were about a thousand of the seed-creatures—literally blanketing the wet earth.

NEXT day the miniature flagellates were beginning to show signs of awaking life. Their leaf-tails, folded over their

bodies, were turning green and beginning to open out like the leaves of an emerging bean plant. Benny sprinkled water over them to hasten this process. Two days later the little creatures were crawling over each other like a swarm of spiders in search of food. Moisture taken from contact with the dirt had rounded out their bodies and unfolded their legs, bringing complete life and motion. Exact replicas of their parent they were, only vastly smaller. At first their movements were slow and feeble as an insect fresh from its chrysalis. But after an initial meal of sand their increase in strength left Benny fairly gasping. However, the green of their tails was a sickly hue—pale like a plant deprived of sunlight. He knew that they must be put into the open. Sunlight is indispensable for the manufacture of starch in plant life.

Early one April morning he decided to let the little creatures bask in the warm sunshine. As he had not yet changed their quarters, he took cage and all and placed it on the back porch where the rays of sunlight fell squarely upon it.

For a moment he lingered to enjoy the beautiful morning. Spring was in the air and vegetation was at the height of its luxuriant growth. Insects droned and buzzed in the under-

brush or scuttled over the warm surface of the driveway. The flagellates seemed to be affected also, for their movements quickened and their leaf-tails slowly opened to receive the fullest amount of sunlight.

Reluctantly Benny entered the house. He'd have to shave quickly this morning or be late to work again. As he lathered his face his movements became almost automatic. His mind was industriously forming pictures of a world left gasping by the miracle of his creation. Of course the idea of evolving different species by rays was not exactly new. One eastern university had created a new plant by the application of X-rays to an ordinary garden growth. But the experiment seemed not to have been carried so far or in just the same manner; nor had ever such results been obtained! An organism that was both animal and plant! The scientific world would be overcome with amazement. Then he would receive offers to join great laboratories and universities at fabulous pay! Riches! Fame!

**B**ENNY was interrupted in the midst of his pleasant vision by the neighbor's dog, which was barking under the very window near which he stood.

"Confound it!" he muttered. "Why can't people keep their

yapping mutts home?" And then, because he was a timid soul, he wished somebody would ask them to keep it quiet.

Abruptly there was a resounding crash in the backyard. The barking rose to a furious pitch. Benny stood as if frozen, with razor held in mid-air. It had been a sound like something tumbling downstairs—all the color vanished from his face. The cage of flagellates! He had forgotten about them! No wonder the dog was barking!

But when he reached the back porch it was too late. The cage was at the bottom of the steps, its door open. The source of all the trouble, a large mongrel dog, was playfully snapping and yelping at the little flagellates as they emerged. Like a swarm of tarantulas they sped over the back lawn and into the surrounding shrubs and undergrowth. Not a one remained except the original specimen. It had grown far too large to escape through the little door.

Benny was in a panic. If he failed to catch everyone of them there was no telling what might happen. When full grown they were very powerful, and with their six legs should be able to travel faster than a race horse. As meat eaters they might attack little children—even grown-ups!

Benny ran his fingers through

his hair, struck by another terrible thought. In two months the things would be full grown and produce a thousand offspring apiece.

"There'll be a total of a million the second month—in four months a thousand million . . ." He could go no farther. For the first time the seriousness of the situation became apparent. In a short while the things would overrun the earth. It was simply a matter of mathematical progression with staggering figures—thousands, millions, billions—and the very earth under their feet as food! Of course many of the flagellates would meet death, but to counteract this was the fact that each would multiply many times in its life span. Benny's fertile imagination pictured a world besieged with the things, death and destruction everywhere.

Forgetting time, work, everything except that he must catch the things, he began to tear up flowers and shrubs like a madman. Indeed, with the shaving cream still on his face, one could well imagine he was foaming at the mouth. Fortunately, none but his neighbor was witness to his actions. When she saw him smeared with soap, and down on his hands and knees in the weeds hitting around wildly with a board, she thought nothing of it. He was more than a little eccen-

tric in her opinion—today's actions only proved it.

By noon Benny gave up in despair. He had caught only fifty-seven of them, and these by smashing with a club as they darted out of the weeds when moved about. The rest might be blocks away for all he knew. They could dash over the ground with amazing rapidity.

For the rest of the day he was too sick with despair to go to work. He could only curse his misfortune and think of how many future tragedies might be directly traceable to his carelessness. In a sudden fit of rage he dashed the expensive vacuum tube to the floor; then immediately regretted his actions.

**PAINFULLY** a month and a half dragged by. Benny was thin from worry and lack of sleep. The flagellates would be nearly full grown now. His tension increased each day as he scanned the papers for news of the things. Probably they would be brought to public attention by some horrible killing.

He still had the first flagellate—and in such a massive cage that he could barely move it. He did not know what to do with the creature; its purpose was gone now. He dared not show it to anyone or tell of his experiment. To make matters worse, brown scale-seeds were growing on it

body again. It would soon multiply!

But before the recent catastrophe could repeat itself Benny determined to do away with the thing—destroy it! Besides, its appetite for large quantities of meat was expensive to satisfy. So that very evening he unpacked his large caliber pistol, and after working up sufficient courage, shot the flagellate. But to his dismay the thing didn't die—in fact it didn't even seem to know that there was a neat hole entirely through its body. A little green liquid oozed from the wound but that was all. He tried another shot—with like results. Then another and another. One leg was completely blown off but still it showed no signs of death. In desperation he took a large butcher knife and literally hacked the strange creature to bits. He might have been cutting butter, for its body was nothing but plant-like cells and there were no bones in it at all. Then, and only then, was it really dead. Benny slept little that night.

Next day his fears were realized. A small news item in the morning paper, written in a jocular manner, caused his anxiety. A ferocious six-legged creature had been seen in the northern section of Los Angeles by several school children. It was said to be about five feet tall, with a leg span greater than that of a large

octopus. The frightened tots had all escaped safely.

"Gosh!" groaned Benny. "Clear up in L.A.! That's a long way from here. The things must be distributed over an area of thousands of square miles already!"

The following morning's paper brought even worse news. Several of the things had been seen near densely populated districts by grown-ups. This time the article was written in a more serious vein.

Two days later the flagellates were creating front page news. They had been seen on dozens of occasions, both near and afar, and their very appearance terrorized whole towns. Several times traffic on the main highways had been disrupted at sight of them; deaths resulted in the ensuing wrecks. Although no actual attack had been reported, police were ordered to patrol all roads and to shoot the things on sight.

Scientific interest was also being aroused. The Smithsonian Institution, National Geographic Society, and a northern college, were sending some of the country's most eminent biologists to capture and study one of the "freaks of nature."

**B**ENNY quit his job. The swiftly increasing number of flagellates seen, and the State-

wide alarm caused, was too much for him. He wouldn't be around when the things got beyond control. They multiplied so fast, and because bullets would hardly affect them, an army would be next to useless as means of protection. His fertile imagination was assisted by numerous stories he had read about man-made entities overrunning the earth. As for warning people—that would be quite useless—at least it had been in stories.

It took little time to load his car with provisions and a few necessities, and to leave his house just as it stood took even less. The rent would be due in a few days so he didn't care. He flashed past the Club without giving it a glance and was soon on the open highway.

**T**HEN a vast curiosity began to assail him. It wouldn't take much longer, he told himself, to drive through Los Angeles on the way to his hide-out. Then perhaps he could see for himself how the terrorized section was faring, or whether the papers had exaggerated things. He wouldn't admit to himself that he wanted a last look at a flagellate before he went to the mountains—but that was why he took the longer route. The distance to the big city was really many miles out of his way, but once his mind was made up it worked

with a singleness of purpose that was amazing for one so timid.

He avoided the downtown section as much as possible, for it was obvious that no flagellate would be found there. The hilly northern residential district was where he turned. His way led through Elysian Park and the famed Figueroa St. tunnel—a tube in three sections running under a series of ridges in the park at a distance of several hundred feet apart.

**A**S he drove through the first tunnel, a motorcycle policeman drew up beside him. For a moment he thought he had violated some traffic rule, but the officer's first words were reassuring.

"Hey, buddie!" he shouted above the roar of traffic. "Did you see it?"

"See what?" Benny managed to yell back.

"Why, that six-legged freak, of course!"

"Oh," said Benny. A sudden comprehending illumination flooded his brain. But before he could answer, a dark something whisked past them as they neared the end of the tunnel. Into the bright sunshine it dashed, and he groaned aloud. A giant flagellate! Six feet high it stood, with its leaf-tail closed in a backward position. It was flashing along at a terrific rate.

THE onrushing stream of automobiles, emerging from the second tunnel, underwent a sudden convulsion as their drivers spied the approaching monster. The foremost skidded desperately curbsward, over which it bounced and thence into the concrete guard wall. The next car collided with the protruding back of the first, and a second later a dozen speeding vehicles had piled up in a terrible wreckage. In a flash the flagellate was past them and into the tunnel.

The motorcycle officer had dropped behind, but Benny continued into the second tunnel before his startled wits could function. Quickly he drove toward the curb, with a vague intention of assisting the stricken motorists. But before he could stop a siren sounded behind him and a police car roared by, guns flaming and reverberating through the tube like ten cannons. He almost ran upon the sidewalk in his endeavor to get out of the way.

Swiftly the patrol car covered the remaining distance in the tunnel, crossed the short intervening space, and melted into the gloom of the third tunnel, hot on the tail of the lone flagellate.

Benny was trembling visibly and a cold sweat covered his brow. Accounts in the papers certainly hadn't been exaggerated! He drove hurriedly on. The

place was getting too hot for him! He eased his conscience by telling himself that other people would stop to help the injured.

The third tunnel was nearly blocked with stalled and smashed autos. There seemed to be no casualties, for apparently uninjured people were climbing from their demolished vehicles as he went past. Of sign of the flagellate or police car there was none.

A minute later when he emerged upon the open street it seemed that the whole city had been aroused. Near and far in various directions sirens wailed dismally, drawing nearer. He supposed they were ambulances or squads of radio cars coming to aid in the chase. The ordinarily fast city traffic was going twice as fast; motorcycle officers were everywhere, paying no attention to recklessness, and police cars fairly bristling with guns and men were rushing past with sirens screaming.

At last Benny reached the open country. He breathed a sigh of relief. The city had been like a disturbed ant-hill—utter confusion, chaos. He could vision the whole country—the world, in complete disorder! An earth overrun by a fearful creature that multiplied with incredible quickness and in staggering numbers! Death everywhere; the human race fighting for its very existence!

WEEKS crawled slowly by. Over four months had passed since Benny made his precipitate exit from civilization. He had gone immediately to an isolated cabin high in the San Gabriel Mountains. Because of its very remoteness he had seen few people, and these only in the distance.

Often he would venture a few miles from his dwelling to hunt rabbits. But most of the time he spent beside the fireplace, warming himself and thinking. He felt fairly secure in his hide-out. Extreme cold and snow would hold back the great mass of flagellates that were sure to come. But if he did chance upon one of the creatures he could defend himself with a large saber that he carried strapped to his waist. He had also grown to dread humans almost more than the flagellates—for any day he expected a large influx of people to the mountains. Like refugees escaping from an overwhelming flood they would seek the higher portions of the earth—that would be man's last stand.

Benny was curious of what was happening in the great land below. He estimated that no less than a million million flagellates were about now, probably most of them in southern California. People wouldn't be able to step outside their homes without running into a dozen of the things.

The whole army would be down there futilely shooting at them and doing more damage than good. A million million flagellates would need lots of meat to eat.

At last Benny was forced to get in touch with civilization. His store of provisions was dangerously low and would need replenishing before the next snow-in. He had no intention of going without food for even one meal.

He made a list of supplies and drove sixty miles to the nearest store. As he expected, there was no sign of a flagellate along the way. Time would be needed for them to invade the vast stretches of mountain.

THE store was located on the edge of the desert, far from the main highway and was used as an outfitting post by miners. The old fellow behind the counter seemed habitually silent, so Benny determined not to inquire about the flagellates unless the man mentioned them himself. He might think he was drunk or crazy, in case he had not heard of them yet. The fellow was eyeing him in a none too covertly manner as it was.

The order had been silently filled, but suddenly the old man caught Benny unawares.

"You out prospecting for gold, pardner?"

"Huh? . . . Oh, No! That is . . ." Benny thought fast. Obvi-

ously he couldn't tell the truth. "I mean, I'm hunting for silver too," he finished lamely.

The man eyed him suspiciously. "Then you better buy some cans o' this stuff to eat. Everybody gets it now-a-days—good to eat in place of bread."

The fellow was as nose-y as an old woman, thought Benny, glancing hastily at a can the storekeeper held out for his inspection. There was a picture of a many-legged creature on the label.

"I don't like canned crab meat," he snapped. All he wanted was to collect his supplies and get back to his cabin as soon as possible.

"But this ain't crab meat!" explained the man. "It's the meat of a big, funny lookin' six-legged critter that. . . ."

Benny froze in his tracks. "What's that? An animal with six legs?"

"Yeah! Ain't you heard about

it? A bunch o' these things appeared from nowheres in L.A. one day—gentle as lambs, though—an' so people started to can 'em. The stuff tastes better'n cake. There's a boom down there now 'cause the things can't live in no place but southern California—the weather, you know. Everybody's gone crazy over the stuff. They're shipping it all over the world. Millions o'dollars is being made . . . what's the matter, son? You sick?"

Benny had dropped to a bench. His face was deathly pale. "Packing the things . . . millions of dollars being made?"

"Yeah. But they can't get enuff of 'em to can 'cause everybody around there goes out and gets one or two of the critters to eat for themselves. They're start'n regular ranches where they can raise 'em, though. Do you want to buy a can?"

Benny weakly nodded his head.

**THE END**

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### ***Through Time and Space With Benedict Breadfruit: II***

THE accepted method for removing space lice from the hull of a ship was by sandblasting, but the boys around the space docks noticed that Benedict Breadfruit's shiny hull was not pitted either by space lice or by sandblasting. Breadfruit used hydrogen cyanide to remove the pests, but he had never told anyone about it.

"Come, Breadfruit," said one of the spaceport officials, "tell us how you remove your burden of pediculous pests!"

Breadfruit gestured at his HCN generator. "I gas 'em off."

—GRANDALL BARRETTON