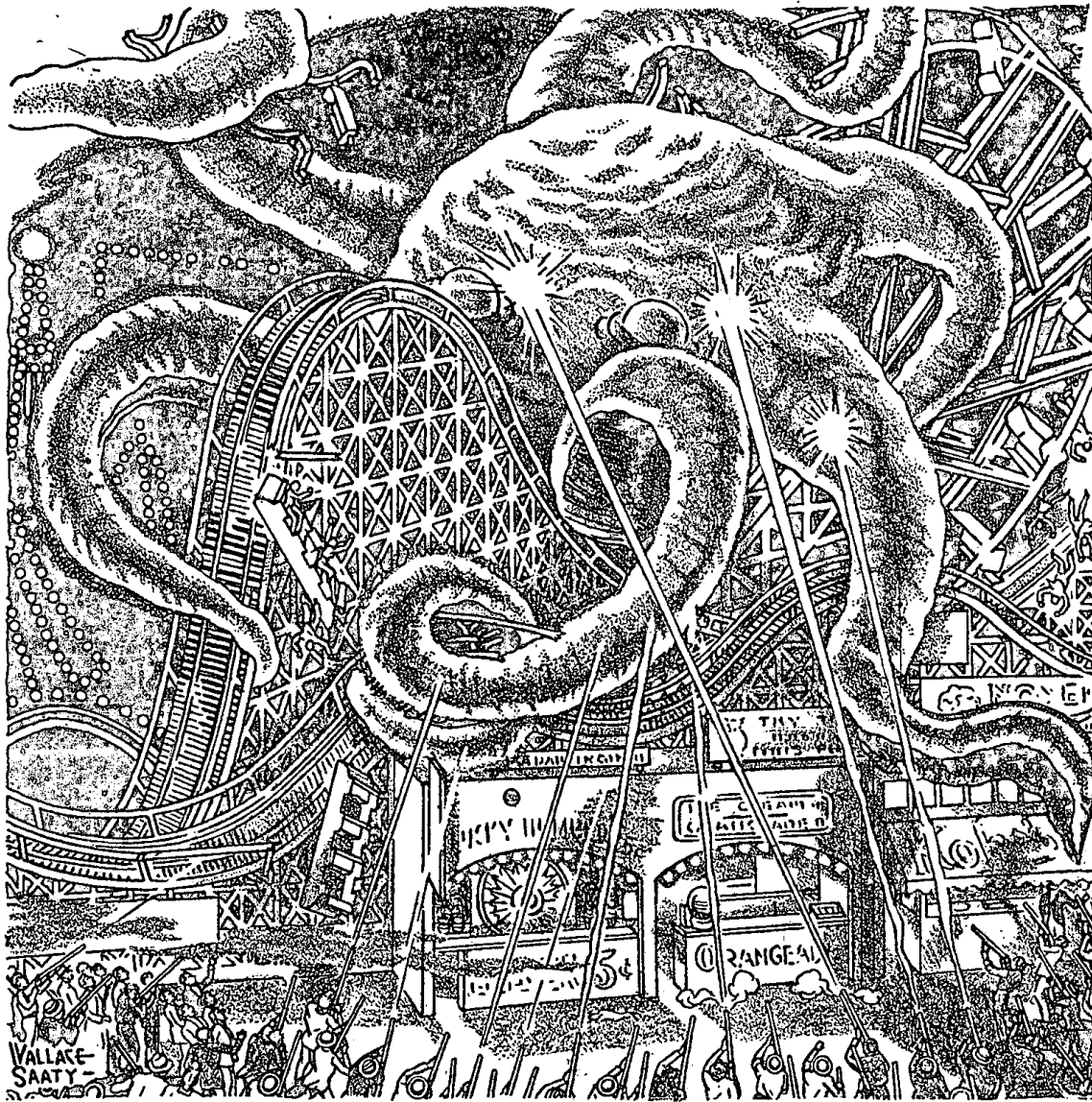


THE INDESTRUCTIBLE

By ROBERT ARTHUR

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Wrenching rifles from a shooting gallery, a score of men began pumping bullets at the space-bug

Nothing Known to Man Could Vanquish the Space-Bug from the Outer Void—Until Science Made It Destroy Itself!

PROFESSOR PERCIVAL PENNYMAN was undergoing a ride on the Spin 'Em, and enjoying it thoroughly, when the creature, later to be known as the Indestructible made its first appearance, directly over Coney Island.

The amusement area was thronged by gay hundreds of thousands. And

not the least gay of them all was Professor Pennyman. His beard fluttering, his bright blue eyes agleam, he had tried every amusement Coney Island had to offer—roller-coasters, shooting galleries, skee ball, spun sugar candy, hot dogs, and beer.

For Percival Pennyman had a firm conviction that most scientists got too

little enjoyment from life. He contrived to enjoy himself almost all the time, a highly irregular procedure for the world's most brilliant mind. His capacity for amusing himself was much deplored by his colleagues. Among those who most heartily deplored it was young Lucius Newton, his laboratory assistant, whose disapproving scowl when Percival Pennyman paused, fascinated by the whirling bowl of the Spin 'Em, indicated his feelings.

"But you promised, Professor Pennyman!" Lucius Newton said in anguished tones as Pennyman strode to the ticket window. "You said the Ferris Wheel would be the last! Professor, we've got to get back to the lab. I left the big centrifuge running, and if I don't stop it, it'll throw those bacteria right through the sides and halfway to Chicago!"

"Stuff, boy!" Pennyman exclaimed cheerily. "Two, please."

He took the blue strips a blond charmer handed him and turned. The great wooden bowl of the Spin 'Em was slowing, and a score of disheveled young folk were getting to their feet, laughing merrily.

"You've got to develop an imagination and a capacity for enjoyment, Lucius," he commented. "You'll never be worth a darn as a scientist until you do. I'm very disappointed in you. I don't think I'll let Deena marry you, after all."

Lucius Newton flushed and was silent. Whenever Pennyman wanted to win an argument from him, he had only to threaten not to let Deena, his red-haired, laughing, curvaceously formed daughter marry his assistant. And the sprightly scientist took full advantage of that weapon. Now, the gate opening, he sprinted down the gangplank to be first on the large bump in the center of the thirty-foot saucer, confident that Lucius Newton was at his heels.

The professor squatted down on the raised middle of the Spin 'Em. Lucius Newton crouched beside him, a pained expression on his well-cut features. For if Professor Pennyman looked like a scientist and acted like a school-boy, Lucius Newton went to the op-

posite extreme. Looking like a Hollywood heart-throb, he acted always like a scientist.

About them clustered a dozen boys and girls, squealing. The plank was raised, the huge bowl began to spin, first slowly, then faster. Professor Pennyman, grinning, clung to his place as the first of the youngsters slid off the raised center and were thrown by centrifugal force out and up to the padded outer rim.

The principle of the Spin 'Em was simple. The thirty-foot bowl of polished wood revolved at a high rate of speed. The object was to remain seated on the large bump in the center. But there was nothing to hold on to, and inevitably all would lose their balance, slide down into the bowl and be thrown upward to the leather-padded rim. There, pressed out flat and quite helpless, they would lie in grotesque postures until the slowing of the bowl, and the slackening of centrifugal force, released them.

Presently, snatched up by invisible fingers of force, both men were flung out to the rim. The bowl continued spinning, the centrifugal force rendering them helpless.

Pennyman ended up flat on his back, his head cushioned. But Newton got a bad bump and, as he rubbed his head ruefully, rage at Pennyman's childishness burned in him. The scientist chortled at his assistant's discomfort.

"Now you know how helpless the bugs in your centrifuge feel, Lucius!" he called. "Calculate our angular momentum for me! Take fifteen feet for the radius and—"

Then he broke off abruptly. Not because of Lucius Newton's sour look, but because his gaze had just encountered the Indestructible descending toward Coney Island.

THERE were many descriptions of the Indestructible, or space-bug, as it was first called, the next day. A million, in fact, because there were a million witnesses. And Percival Pennyman, pinned out flat in the Spin 'Em and getting only kaleidoscopic glimpses each time he went around, probably grasped more in those brief glimpses than anyone else of the mil-

lion. Because the operator of the Spin 'Em, gaping, quite forgot his job. He let the big saucer continue to spin, and Pennyman, helpless, lay there and concentrated on looking.

"Like a great big octopus, all glowing as if it was a firefly," was one description the next day. Still another called it "a big ball of cold fire, with flames shooting out."

But this last was highly inaccurate, though to an excited imagination the palely glowing creature, thrusting out luminous pseudopods, might have so appeared.

The truth, as Percival Pennyman quickly perceived, was that the space-bug was capable of many forms, but basically was a great, egg-shaped blob some eighty feet through the small diameter, suffused by a cold, yellow-orange light. It made a fine show in the heavens as it hovered five hundred feet above Coney Island. The throngs, faces turned upward, at first took it for some new type of fireworks attraction. But after only a moment it began to settle.

Its downward course brought it toward the boardwalk not a hundred yards north of the Spin 'Em, where Professor Pennyman was watching with avid interest. At a height of some two hundred feet it paused. Flattening out, it projected half a dozen fifty-foot "arms" from equally spaced points about its circumference. It hung thus a few seconds, making a spectacular effect as its glowing pseudopods writhed and coiled.

Directly beneath it was a giant roller-coaster. Just beyond, a huge Ferris Wheel was turning, swings crowded.

Then one dangling arm lengthened. A three-car train crawled over the top of the first rise in the roller coaster and started downward on its breath-taking plunge. Halfway down, the tentacle caught the rearmost car.

As lightly as a child's toy the train rose into the air. The forward cars dropped and swung pendulum-like, the screams of the occupants cutting sharp and clear through the noises of the crowd. The safety bars that locked the riders in held some, but many fell free, and still screaming, plunged

downward into the framework of girders beneath.

A second train passed beneath the dangling first, unharmed. Another pseudopod reached out, coiled about the Ferris Wheel, contracted. The great wheel tilted outward, fell, was caught halfway to the ground when the tentacle tightened and held it there. Panic-stricken riders clung desperately to the swings, and, unable to maintain their holds, plummeted to the earth.

As if testing its strength against these creations of man, and perhaps thereby gauging any opposition it might encounter, the space-bug dropped a third tentacle to the roller coaster tracks and pulled. With a vast rending, metal girders gave way. A crowded train of cars, just shooting down toward the spot, met emptiness where the tracks should have been. For a moment it hurtled onward under its momentum. Then it curved downward and plunged into nothingness.

FOR a few moments then, nothing more happened. The space-bug hung there, as if contemplating the damage it had done. Those moments enabled a score of men to make a futile gesture. Wrenching rifles from the counter of the nearest shooting gallery, they began pumping .22s into the luminous bulk overhead, with no effect whatever.

Then the Coast Guard rocket-plane came racing through the night, in response to an emergency call. A slender, fish-shaped creation with stubby wings, its pontoons retracted, it flashed into view and made one great circle as the pilot sized up the situation. It came out of the turn at a thousand feet and dived straight for the visitant.

Half a mile distant, the rocket-plane's two wing cannon began barking. Their muzzle flare was a steady white flickering as six hundred explosive two-inch shells a minute screamed toward the space-bug. The shells penetrated slightly into the mass above and burst.

But the creature remained undisturbed, despite the barrage. The pilot

of the Coast Guard plane pulled out of his dive to circle and come back. And at that instant the space-bug moved.

So swiftly the eye could scarcely follow, it raced upward, still clinging to the Ferris Wheel, the roller-coaster cars, and the section of track. Its rise took it directly into the path of the zooming plane. The pilot flung himself over on his back, but never had a chance to avoid the collision.

The rocket-plane struck the glowing mass head on, then crumpled. The space-bug was thrown backward a couple of feet. The plane, a ball of metal wreckage, fell, to crash down on a section of bathhouses a quarter mile away.

With this, the space-bug seemed to tire of its sport. It dropped the Ferris Wheel and its other booty to the ground. Withdrawing its extended tentacles and resuming its original egg-shape, it raced off to the northeast, becoming a pinpoint of light that vanished.

At last the proprietor of the Spin 'Em remembered his job. The bowl came to a stop, and Professor Pennyman and Lucius Newton were able to escape, dizzily, to follow the frightened throngs that were stampeding back to their homes via the swiftly zipping underground escawalks that had replaced surface transportation since the war of 1990.

PROFESSOR PENNYMAN, seated at his untidy desk in one corner of his laboratory, was playing absently with a dime-store puzzle when Lucius Newton strode agitatedly in next morning, the daily papers under his arm.

Trailing Lucius was lovely Deena Pennyman, smartly dressed in a close-fitting sports outfit.

"Professor!" Lucius Newton blurted. "Have you seen the morning papers? I suppose you haven't even looked at them!" His tone was scathing.

Professor Pennyman glanced up brightly.

"Hello, Lucius," he chirped. "Good morning, Deena. Why is your boy friend so excited?"

"I'm afraid he's mad at you, Dad,"

Deena admitted, giving him an affectionate peck on the forehead. "That creature you saw last night—after it left Coney, acted very naughtily. And Lucius is angry at you now because it's just occurred to him that you might have been hurt last evening. Whereas, if you'd stayed in your lab where you belong, instead of gallivanting around Coney Island, you'd have been in no danger."

Lucius Newton flung the black-headed lined papers onto the desk.

"Look, Professor!" he commanded grimly.

Professor Pennyman sighed and held out his puzzle.

"All right, Lucius," he agreed. "I'll read the papers if you'll work this puzzle. You see, there are four balls in the middle of the box. The idea is to get them into four holes in the corners, and—"

"You spin the box, and that puts them in the holes," Lucius interrupted him. "Professor Pennyman—"

Pennyman winked at his comely daughter. There was a secret pact between them to put Lucius Newton at a disadvantage whenever possible, in an effort to break down his stiffness. Deena hoped that when this happened, he might acquire a few romantic ideas. She liked him. She liked his square-cut handsomeness. She knew he loved her. But unless he could break down and give a little evidence of the fact soon—well, she might call the engagement off.

But Professor Pennyman's impish mood died away as he scanned the papers.

"Mmm," he muttered. "After he left us last night, our luminous friend dropped over to pay London a visit, it seems. Picked up the Nelson Monument there, and dropped it on the House of Lords. Was ripping up a few miles of high tension wires when a squadron of the British rocket-plane fleet attacked it. The Fleet was wiped out in the same way the Coast Guard plane was destroyed."

"Then," Lucius informed him, "the creature dashed out a thousand miles into space to intercept a freighter coming in from the Lunar mines. It swam—or whatever it does to move

about—around it for awhile, and the skipper tried to drive it off with demolition rockets. Three hits didn't faze the thing."

"Mmm, yes," Professor Pennyman agreed. "It wrapped a tentacle around the nose of the ship and pulled her twelve points off her course. Then it let go, and the skipper, in desperation, gave it one of the new Keebler atomic bombs. Dangerous, that. Suppose he'd missed, and the bomb had hit an Earth city?"

"But he didn't miss, Dad," Deena put in. "And that's the interesting point. He smacked the space-bug square in the tummy—if it has a tummy—"

"And the bomb went off, of course," Lucius finished. "Then—"

"Then, apparently," Professor Pennyman completed the narration for himself, "the most amazing thing happened."

"Nothing whatever happened!" Lucius scowled.

"That was the amazing thing," Pennyman chuckled, his beard wagging. "When a Keebler goes off, everything that's possible should happen. Theoretically, nothing living or man-created can exist after contact with an atomic bomb. But our visitor merely swallowed it and went about its business of sabotage. But the point is—"

"The point is, Dad," Deena put in, "that the thing you saw last night is a dangerous hunk of stuff. It eats explosive bullets, and, after swallowing a Keebler, licks its lips. It seems to be positively indestructible."

"Nothing living is indestructible." Lucius announced flatly.

Professor Pennyman blinked.

"Why not?" he asked.

"*Nothing* is indestructible," Lucius Newton insisted uncertainly. "Not even the Universe itself."

"Ah!" Pennyman's beard wagged again. "Suppose the Earth ran up against a creature that, although it might be destroyed if it fell into the Sun, or was smashed between colliding planets, is *indestructible* by man? The space-bug is such a creature—it cannot be destroyed by man."

The two young people gaped at him in astonishment.

LUCIUS NEWTON'S face was a study in manful effort as he tried to adjust himself to a new idea.

"Professor," he said at last, "it—it's pretty hard for me to imagine. I confess, on the evidence, this creature is awfully tough. But that anything of flesh and blood is indestructible—"

"I know it's hard for you to imagine, Lucius," Percival Pennyman told him with a touch of impatience. "That's your whole trouble. You're a fine scientist, but you can't imagine. Who said anything about flesh and blood?"

"But—but—" his assistant stammered—"all living things—"

"Are flesh and blood?" Pennyman demanded wickedly. "What about plants? What about trees? However, we understand what you mean. There is no essential necessity for life to confine itself to structures created from protoplasm. I think it's quite obvious our visitor isn't flesh and blood, at least in any of the forms with which we are acquainted."

"But then what is he?" Deena asked.

"There," Percival Pennyman admitted, running his fingers through his beard, "my imagination breaks down. I don't know. Perhaps it's built up out of something that is half matter and half force-field."

"I've formed a few theories that do not seem to me unlikely. The first is that our space-bug, as it's being called, obviously comes from some other Universe, perhaps from a perfectly cold, airless world which is not greatly different from space itself as an environment."

"Obviously, also, it can travel in space. This can not be done by muscular means. So its motive power, as well as its nourishment, must lie in the realms of force. I postulate that it can absorb force in the form of light, atomic explosions such as it was treated to by the Keebler, gravitational, electric, and other similar forces."

"To my mind, there is only one likely way in which it can cruise through space as it does—by making use of, and warping, the force-fields that permeate the whole Universe. These are electric and gravitational in nature. We are beginning to be able

to affect them by means of machinery. I think our space-bug simply affects them within its own body, by voluntary means unfathomable to us. The light which it gives off is nothing more or less than the waste product of the forces on which it subsists."

The twinkle came back into Pennyman's eyes as he watched the changing expressions of the other two.

"Wowie, Dad!" his daughter exclaimed at last, in sheer admiration. "Your imagination has outdone itself this time. I'd hate to hear what some of your colleagues would say if they'd heard you. They'd razz you until you thought you were riding on a buzz-saw."

Lucius Newton scowled, his strong face thoughtful.

"It's difficult to conceive, even though not impossible, Professor Pennyman," he said stubbornly. "I still can't bring myself to believe that any creature, even of a life-form unknown to us, can be—"

"Well, I may be wrong," Pennyman agreed, with new briskness. "We'll soon see. Just before you came in, Admiral Wortman of the Space Battle Fleet contacted me. One thing the papers didn't get is that our space-bug tangled with a rocket destroyer on the way to the freighter's aid last night. It wrapped itself around the craft several times and squeezed, crushing it like an egg. The crew was lost. So the Navy is out for action, and I've been invited to go along, with some others, as scientific observers. As my assistant and secretary, you're both going, too."

"Good!" Deena cried. "I always liked sailors. They're so romantic. If anybody can quench Mr. Indestructible, the Navy can."

From the corner of her eye she looked at Lucius Newton. But that handsome young man only scowled darkly and said nothing.

THEY took off, shortly after noon, in the forefront of a battle squadron of half a dozen ships from the Rocket Navy. The flagship, *Prometheus*, carried the scientific and journalistic observers. Most of them were in the main observation tower amid-

ships. But Pennyman, his daughter, and Newton occupied the bridge with Admiral Wortman.

Besides the three-thousand-foot flagship, there were two heavy cruisers, one a special E-X experimental job, in which has just been mounted a super-Jarman heat inductor gun that could bring a battle rocket to a dull red glow from twelve miles in seventeen minutes.

There were also two super-speed rams, equipped with detachable noses. These, with a rigidity of frame and an acceleration speed unprecedented, were what their name implied—vessels specially built for ramming in space combat.

Led by the fast rams, the squadron blasted off from Washington shortly past noon and headed westward toward the Australias, where the space-bug was then reported.

Two hours' flight in the high stratosphere took them across the Pacific, and then they sighted their prey.

Glowing with brilliance in the blackness of space, the space-bug hurtled toward them from the west, as if sensing their hostile intentions. Quick observation told them that its speed approximated their own. If it had nothing in reserve, then, the rams should be able to catch it.

Pursuit, however, was not necessary. The space-bug brought the fight to them. It raced toward the nearest cruiser, which had taken the forefront of the battle line.

Watching, the observers plainly saw three rockets and two Keeblers strike almost simultaneously. For an instant the creature hesitated in mid-flight as the Keeblers flared up. Then it seemed to suck the explosions into itself and, glowing with a new brilliance, closed up the gap between itself and the cruiser.

"We're only feeding it," Professor Pennyman remarked, with deep interest, as the cruiser swerved and avoided the rush of the oncoming space-bug. "It's relishing the Keeblers like a kid on a picnic relishes hot dogs. Now let's see how it likes the Jarman."

With the cruiser out of the battle line, the fast E-X ship was coming up.

There was no visible sign that the Jarman induction gun had been brought into action, except the thermostatic telltale on the instrument panel. Focused on the space-bug, and until now registering in the neighborhood of a hundred degrees absolute, it suddenly spurted upward.

Only for an instant, however. Then the needle fell back and remained where it had been, wavering slightly.

"We're pouring everything we've got into it, Admiral," reported the captain of the E-X ship through the communivisor. "We've a hundred and seven per cent overload on the generators, and we've by-passed all fuses. The creature ought to be vaporizing now—and it seems to like it!"

The last was true. The space-bug had paused in its flight. Like an animal basking in the sun it floated in space, a great egg-shaped lump, sucking up the short-waves that were flooding it. But only for a moment. Then, purposefully, it moved toward the E-X rocket.

A worried frown on his forehead, Admiral Wortman barked orders taking the ship out of the action, and instructing the rams to move up. The order was easier to give than to execute, for the space-bug had seemingly set itself to destroy the E-X craft, and though it was fleeing on a tangential course, the luminous visitor was overhauling it from behind.

They were well out into space now, and the fight was pulling away from the flagship. The heavy battle wagon had no chance of overtaking the rams that were zipping up to pass between the space-bug and the E-X, so they cut power and tuned on the visascanner.

ON the screen they saw the Number One ram circle the E-X and, in pursuance of orders, "attempt a head-on collision with the bug." There was no attempt to avoid the meeting, and the ram was still picking up speed when they met.

There was dead silence on the bridge of the flagship as five pairs of eyes watched the visascreen. With held breath all saw the false nose of the ram crumple, saw the glowing space-bug seem to flatten about the ram-nose

as if plastered there.

But the ram was built for this business. She had a spine that would have supported two cruisers. She shuddered, but she did not crack and she did not stop. After the merest hesitation she went on, thrown onto a new course by the impact, but visibly picking up speed again.

"Admiral!" It was the voice of the captain of the ram, barely audible, coming in on the report circuit. "All controls — smashed — by impact. Acceleration jammed — at twenty-one point two—gravities. Can't kill our Benson spark and—"

The voice died away, gasping out into nothingness, though the circuit still hummed.

"Good God!" Admiral Wortman muttered, eyes strained to the scene on the screen. "Twenty-one gravities! They must be jelly by now!"

"But the space-bug is still caught!" Deena whispered. "Look, Dad! The acceleration is keeping it pinned to the nose of the ram. It can't recover itself enough to get loose. It may be indestructible—but it has certain limitations."

It was true. The space creature lay over the damaged nose of the runaway ram like an empty sack plastered to the radiator of an old-time automobile. Held there by the constant speed increase of twenty-one gravities a second, it was temporarily helpless.

"And the ram," Admiral Wortman remarked with grim satisfaction, "is going to crash somewhere in India!"

The helpless ram hurtled downward past them. It would take only seconds to reach the ground, and they raced downward after it toward the estimated point of contact.

They were a thousand miles up when the doomed craft plunged into a rocky region near the foot of Mount Everest. Even at that distance they could see dust rise from the crash.

Admiral Wortman let out a long-drawn breath, and they knew he was thinking of the crew of the lost ship.

"At least," he said at last, "we've finished the thing off. Nothing could live through that."

"I'm afraid you're wrong," Percival Pennyman sighed. "He's not as bright

as he was, and he's not feeling as chipper, either. But there he is."

There was stunned silence on the bridge as the observers saw the pale dot of light that rose slowly out of the dust cloud and, refusing to try further battle, sped away eastward.

Only Lucius Newton spoke.

"Indestructible!" he choked. "*Indestructible!*"

NEWTON paced back and forth, stopping occasionally to glower at Pennyman. The professor was playing idly with a puzzle, and whistling a monotonous tune.

Two weeks had passed since the job of getting rid of the indestructible space-bug had been placed squarely in the laps of the world's scientists, and Lucius Newton had taken the problem as a personal challenge. His incredulity that anything living could be, to all intents and purposes, immune to the worst man could do had passed over into a grim determination to rid the world of the thing, somehow. For Deena Pennyman, in despair at last, had told him that she had kept putting off marrying him because his lack of imagination discouraged her, and unless he developed some soon, she was going to break the engagement.

If he could prove her wrong, by doing something like figuring out a way to rout the space-bug, which on the face of it was certainly going to take imagination on someone's part, she'd reconsider, but—

She'd let it go at that. But her inference had been clear. And ever since, Lucius had wrestled with the problem in grim intensity.

Now he stopped behind Pennyman. The professor was amusing himself by spinning his toy puzzle, making the four balls rush out to their places in the corners.

"Professor," Lucius groaned, "Admiral Wortman and the Secretary of War are calling in half an hour. What are you going to tell them?"

"Me?" Pennyman chirped. "Boy, I have nothing to tell them. I'm getting old. My mind isn't as agile as it used to be. I've turned the job over to you. What're you going to tell them?"

"I DON'T know," the younger man gritted. "Everything's been tried. Four Navy destroyers got it trapped in a mile-square net of steel cable yesterday. But it just pushed tentacles through the spaces and ripped the net to pieces. So far it's been mostly mischievous, ripping up bridges, knocking down buildings, interfering with air traffic, as if it was just showing us how feeble we are to stop it.

"But trade is at a standstill, all rocket trips have been canceled, the world is blacked-out every night because lighted cities seem to attract it, and the death toll is mounting steadily. It isn't infinite in its powers, of course. I estimate that it can put out about as much power as a Navy cruiser, and has a total mass, whatever it may be composed of, equal to that of a destroyer.

"But it is invulnerable to attack with any weapons we own, and any trap that might hold it is unfeasible. The only time we've even come close to having it at a disadvantage was when it butted that Navy ram head on, and then was held there by its own inertia as the ram picked up speed. Apparently a twenty-fold increase in its relative mass was too much for it to cope with.

"That doesn't help us much, though. The only thing I've been able to think of is to snag it on the bow of a battleship and plunge the ship into the Sun at a constantly increasing speed. But that won't work, because in the first place it's too smart to get caught that way again, and in the second, no ship could accelerate for even a fraction of that distance. The fuel wouldn't last. So that's out. And so am I," Newton Lucius concluded with deep moodiness.

"I think," Percival Pennyman proposed cheerfully, "we ought to take another trip to Coney Island. The sea air would clear our brains, and a ride or two—"

"That silly spinning saucer, which you seem so fond of, would addle my wits completely," Lucius Newton told him grimly. "No, thanks. I feel dizzy enough as it is now, without being whirled around helter skelter. And

give me that puzzle!" he finished with the sudden, bitter intensity of vast exasperation. "I threw it away once. This time it goes for good!"

He snatched up the puzzle and strode to the window, just as Deena entered.

"Dad," she reported, "Admiral Wortman and Secretary Miller are here. They're anxious to know if you've had any ideas yet."

"Only one," Percival Pennyman grinned, with a sidelong look at his assistant who, about to hurl the tiny puzzle out the window, had suddenly paused and was studying it intently.

"Oh, good!" Deena exclaimed. "What, Dad?"

"That Lucius Newton's imagination has developed," her father answered, obscurely.

"I wish I could believe you, Dad," the girl sighed, with a quick glance at the young man, who was just turning around, a blank look on his features.

"Yes!" Newton roared. "Your father is right!" His face was alight, with a look Deena had never seen there before. "Send them in, because I want to talk to them! I want a battleship, and I want a lot of things done to it in a hurry! And if they want to get rid of the space-bug, they'll get what I want. So move, girl!"

Deena gasped, a gasp that contained equal parts of indignation, astonishment, and startled joy, and fled.

THE battleship control cabin into which Lucius Newton, Percival Pennyman, Deena, and Admiral Wortman were crowded in was some forty feet across, and spherical. It carried only the barest minimum of instruments necessary for operating the ship in space, having been towed there by half a dozen tugs. It was a skeleton ship.

Newton sat before such controls as there were, his brow furrowed with concentration. Admiral Wortman watched him worriedly, though Deena and Professor Pennyman seemed quite cheerful.

"Well," the admiral muttered gloomily, "I suppose you still won't tell us what you plan, Newton, but I

certainly wish I knew. I had the devil's own time, getting a battleship not even off the ways from the Navy Department, and the alterations you wanted. Believe me, madness was the least they accused me of when I gave them the specifications. If your scheme doesn't work, my career in the Navy is over, and I can just hustle for a job as captain on a fertilizer scow."

"It'll work," Lucius Newton rasped, self-confidence in his voice. "Is Indestructible after us yet?"

"Coming up from the rear," Admiral Wortman reported, glancing at the visascanner. But I don't understand it. A battleship with absolutely no weapons—a control cabin suspended in oil at the center of gravity, and all controls radio-operated—no crew—every interior fitting stripped out—a stress factor of twenty-normal added all through the ship—an observation window a hundred feet across set into the bow, with glass that will go if a child leans against it—what does it all mean?"

He shook his head as his voice trailed off. Lucius Newton swung their blast control to full on, and leaned back.

"You'll see," he commented. "Watch the screen."

They were operating with an accessory visa-transmitter about three miles off their port, magnetically held. The screen showed them their own ship moving slowly across its surface, a fan of blue radiance indicating her blast exhaust, and a great circle of bright illumination which was the peculiar observation window, set into the ship just behind her forward tubes, which the admiral had mentioned.

The battleship, rebuilt before finished at Lucius Newton's demand, was speeding in the general direction of Saturn's orbit, though well clear of any planet. Now, watching, they saw the tiny yellow dot that was overhauling them from behind—the space-bug coming to the attack.

In a few moments it was swooping past them, circling as if examining the battle wagon.

"It's going to attack," Wortman grumbled. "Going to try ramming us. Knows we can't harm it any."

"It's attracted to the observation window," Lucius Newton informed him coldly. "Our space-bug is slightly phototropic, attracted by lights. When it rams us, it'll aim for the window. Then you watch."

"It'll come busting right into us," Deena commented. "Is that—"

She broke off. The screen showed the egg-shaped spot of light racing toward them at ever-increasing speed from a point a few degrees off their nose. As Lucius had predicted, the space-bug was going to fling itself against the hundred-foot observation window.

On the screen, ship and space-bug met. And the Indestructible vanished!

"He's plunged right into us!" Admiral Wortman grunted. "Knocked us a point off course. He's brought up at the bottom of that hold you had built behind the window, Newton—three hundred feet deep, with a parabolic curve to the walls, and as smooth as a mirror. But he won't stay there. In a second he'll back out and then—"

"Hah!" Lucius Newton snorted contemptuously.

His hand flashed to the controls. He slapped down one lever, then another. Admiral Wortman gurgled in amazement. On the screen, blue flame spurted from the nose of the ship, from a right-angle course-change vent. Simultaneously a rear course-change vent blasted off, on the opposite side of the ship. Instantly the great battleship spun on her axis. The opposed blasts, one at each end, increased in violence. The spin of the ship became a whirl, dizzying to watch, that blended into a gray blur ringed by blue flame.

IN a maneuver that no ship was designed to stand, that all control boards were built to prevent from occurring by accident, Lucius Newton had transformed them into a three-thousand foot pinwheel whirling madly in space!

In the control room, suspended as it was in oil at the center of gravity, they felt no motion. The ship was spinning about them. But the oil was heating from friction, and that heat would take only seconds to become unbearable.

"Brace yourselves!" Lucius barked. "Here we go!"

He jabbed home a last switch. Compressed air screamed. A port flew open, an air blast blew the independent control cabin out of the ship at right angles to the plane of spin. Ten seconds later they were a mile away. Half an hour later, picked up by the *Prometheus*, which had followed on orders, they stood on the bridge and watched the deserted battleship spin dizzily away toward the outer reaches of the Universe.

"But I don't understand," Admiral Wortman was still muttering, as they watched the screen, on which vanishing craft was only a whirling blur outlined by blast flame. "The space-bug is still on her. He hasn't emerged."

"He's down in that specially built hold," Lucius Newton chuckled, relaxed now. "He's squashed flat against those polished parabolic walls by centrifugal force that would spread you or me out into a film an atom thick. His one weakness I could find was an inability to move when sufficiently held down by inertia. His mass is terrific. So is his power, of course. But to utilize it, he has to be on balance, so to speak. And where he is now he can never get back on balance."

"Figure it out. Say he's a thousand feet from the axis of the ship. She's spinning free in the vacuum of space at about six hundred r.p.m. This puts his actual velocity of movement in the neighborhood of twelve miles a second *in a constantly changing direction!* It wouldn't bother him in a straight line. It's the constant directional change, with its resultant of centrifugal force, that has him buffaloed. He can't fight it. He's pinned down like a fly on a board, just as you'd be if you took a ride on the Spin 'Em at Coney Island, where I've spent a lot of time lately—thanks to Professor Pennyman!"

"That's why the ship was reenforced—to stand the incredible stresses that are developing. It'll hold a long time, and as long as it does, Mr. Indestructible is a prisoner. Because even after the blast fuel is used up, the rocket will spin in space forever as it travels away from the Earth. That's how long our durable friend should be a pris-

oner. And it's a long time!"

"Whew!" Admiral Wortman gasped, when he had digested this. "A prisoner of his own inertia, captive to centrifugal force, penned up and shipped off to the ends of the Universe. You couldn't kill him—so you deported him!"

"Exactly," Lucius Newton agreed. "I could have plunged him into the Sun, but how do I know he wouldn't have survived even that? This way, if he ever does get loose, he'll be so many light years away Earth can forget about him for good. And now that we're rid of him, I've another job to do."

He turned, and without any preliminary, grabbed Deena.

"You've put me off long enough, Deena!" he exclaimed. "And I'm tired of it. We'll be married this afternoon in New York. And right now I'm going to do something I've been imagining myself doing for a long time."

Giving her no chance to protest, or slip from his embrace, he kissed her. Firmly. Then again. And again. Percival Pennyman chuckled, and led a wide-eyed Admiral Wortman to the nearest door.

"That boy will go far!" Admiral Wortman was saying heartily as they exited. "He has a grand imagination! How he ever came to think of the scheme he did is beyond me."

"It wasn't easy," Professor Pennyman chuckled, perhaps not entirely clearly. "But it will give him a self-confidence that's going to be the making of him. That's my recipe for a scientist. Brains plus imagination. And Lucius has 'em both—now."

He winked over his shoulder at his daughter, who was still firmly clasped in Lucius Newton's arms, and she winked back.

"Imagination!" she sighed blissfully to herself, as Lucius' arms tightened again. "I'll say he has! And not so darned scientific, either!"

Next Issue: MYSTERY WORLD, a Story by EANDO BINDER

Is there Magic in this
Oriental Confection?

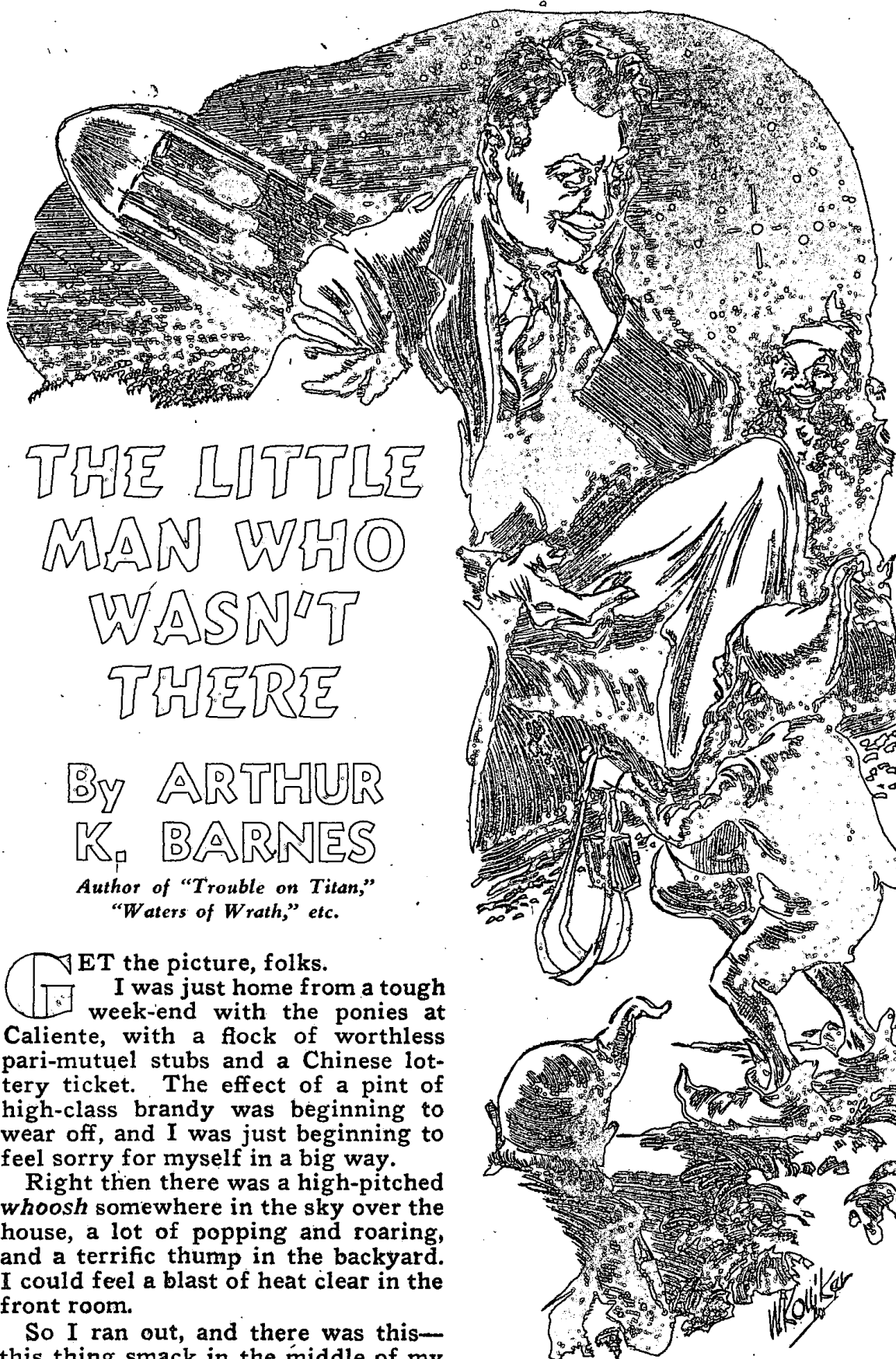
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THE LITTLE MAN WHO WASN'T THERE

By ARTHUR K. BARNES

Author of "Trouble on Titan,"
"Waters of Wrath," etc.

GET the picture, folks.

I was just home from a tough week-end with the ponies at Caliente, with a flock of worthless pari-mutuel stubs and a Chinese lottery ticket. The effect of a pint of high-class brandy was beginning to wear off, and I was just beginning to feel sorry for myself in a big way.

Right then there was a high-pitched *whoosh* somewhere in the sky over the house, a lot of popping and roaring, and a terrific thump in the backyard. I could feel a blast of heat clear in the front room.

So I ran out, and there was this—this thing smack in the middle of my petunia bed. The petunias were



He brought out a funny looking gadget