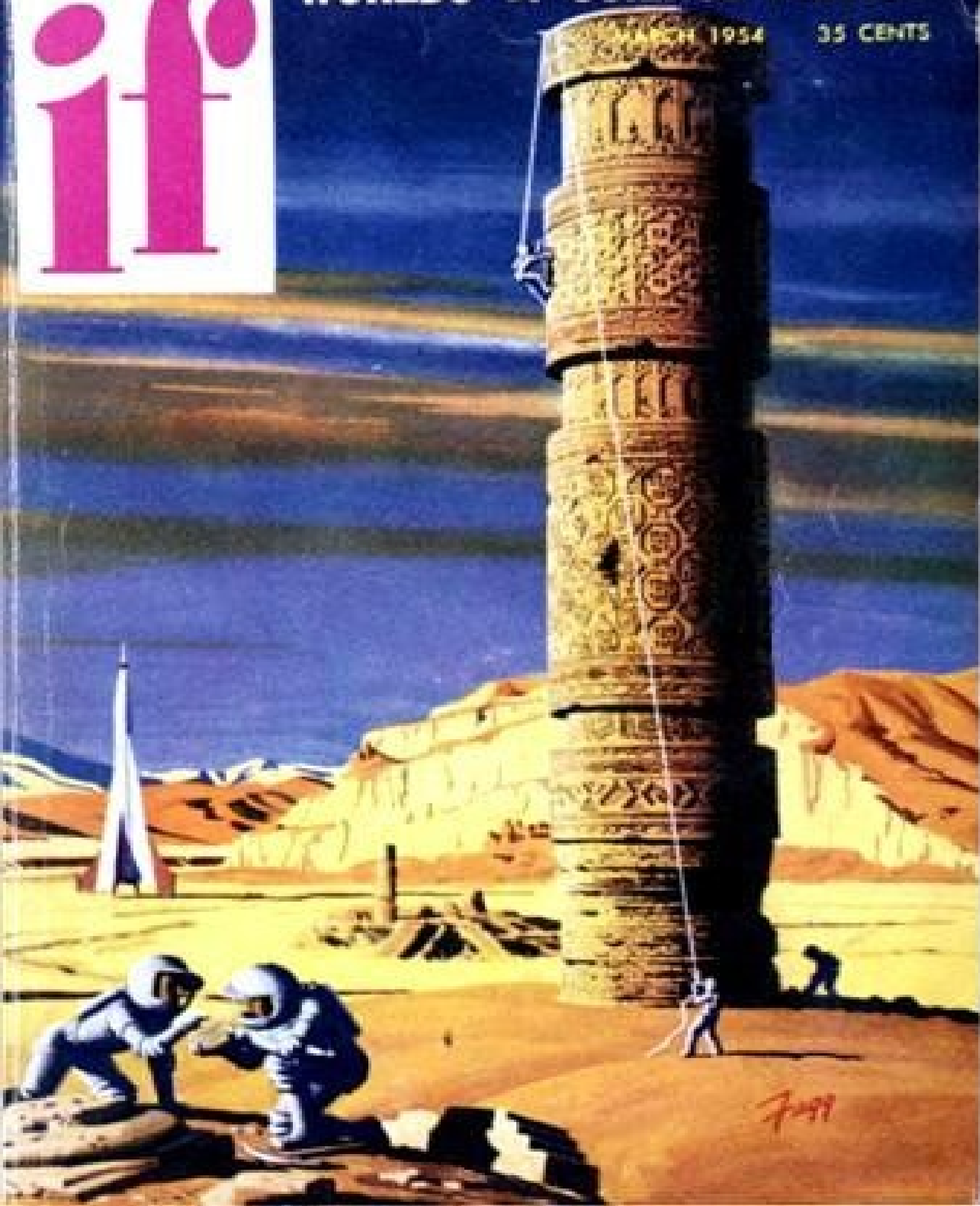


# WORLDS of SCIENCE FICTION

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**TABBY**

**By Winston Marks**

**Illustrated by Rudolph Palais**

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*Tabby was peculiar, of course, but seemed harmless: just a little green fly that couldn't even protect itself from ordinary spiders. So the spiders fed, and grew, and fed, and grew...*

April 18, 1956

Dear Ben: It breaks my heart you didn't sign on for this trip. Your replacement, who *calls* himself an ichthyologist, has only one talent that pertains to fish—he drinks like one. There are nine of us in the expedition, and every one of us is fed up with this joker, Cleveland, already. We've only been on the island a week, and he's gone native, complete with beard, bare feet and bone laziness. He slops around the lagoon like a beachcomber and hasn't brought in a decent specimen yet.

The island is a bit of paradise, though. Wouldn't be hard to let yourself relax under the palms all day instead of collecting blisters and coral gashes out in the bright sun of the atoll. No complaints, however. We aren't killing ourselves, and our little camp is very comfortable. The portable lab is working out fine, and the screened sleeping tent-houses have solved the one big nuisance we've suffered before: *Insects*. I think an entomologist would find more to keep him busy here than we will.

Your ankle should be useable by the time our next supply plane from Hawaii takes off. If you apply again at the Foundation right now I'm sure Sellers and the others will help me get rid of Cleveland, and there'll be an open berth here.

Got to close now. Our amphib jets off in an hour for the return trip. Hope this

note is properly seductive. Come to the isles, boy, and live!—Cordially, Fred

---

May 26, 1956

Dear Ben: Now, aren't you sorry you didn't take my advice?!!!! I'm assuming you read the papers, and also, that too tight a censorship hasn't clamped down on this thing yet. Maybe I'm assuming too much on the latter. Anyhow, here's a detailed version from an actual eyewitness.

That's right! I was right there on the beach when the "saucer" landed. Only it looked more like a king-size pokerchip. About six feet across and eight inches thick with a little hemispherical dome dead center on top. It hit offshore about seventy-five yards with a splash that sounded like a whale's tail. Jenner and I dropped our seine, waded to shore and started running along the beach to get opposite it. Cleveland came out of the shade and helped us launch a small boat.

We got within twenty feet of the thing when it started moving out, slowly, just fast enough to keep ahead of us. I was in the bow looking right at it when the lid popped open with a sound like a cork coming out of a wine bottle. The little dome had split. Sellers quit rowing and we all hit the bottom of the boat. I peeked over the gunwale right away, and it's a good thing. All that came out of the dome was a little cloud of flies, maybe a hundred or so, and the breeze picked them up and blew them over us inshore so fast that Cleveland and Sellers never did see them.

I yelled at them to look, but by then the flies were in mingling with the local varieties of sudden itch, and they figured I was seeing things. Cleveland, though, listened with the most interest. It develops that his specialty *is* entomology. He took this job because he was out of work. Don't know how he bluffed his way past the Foundation, but here he is, and it looks like he might be useful after all.

He was all for going ashore, but Sellers and I rowed after the white disk for awhile until it became apparent we couldn't catch it. It's a good thing we didn't. A half hour later, Olafsen caught up to it in the power launch. We were watching from shore. It was about a half mile out when Ole cut his speed. Luckily he was alone. We had yelled at him to pick us up and take us along, but he was too excited to stop. He passed us up, went out there and boom!

It wasn't exactly an A-bomb, but the spray hit us a half mile away, and the surface wave swamped us.

Sellers radioed the whole incident to Honolulu right away, and they are sending out a plane with a diver, but we don't think he'll find anything. Things really blew! So far we haven't even found any identifiable driftwood from the launch, let alone Ole's body or traces of the disk.

Meanwhile, Cleveland has come to believe my story, and he's out prowling around with an insect net. Most energy he's shown in weeks.



May 28—Looks like this letter will be delayed a bit. We are under quarantine. The government plane came this morning. They sent along a diver, two reporters and a navy officer. The diver went down right away, but it's several hundred feet deep out there and slants off fast. This island is the tip of a sunken mountain, and the diver gave up after less than an hour. Personally I think a couple of sharks scared him off, but he claims there's so much vegetable ruck down there he couldn't expect to find anything smaller than the launch's motor.

Cleveland hasn't found anything unusual in his bug net, but everyone is excited here, and you can guess why.

When the "saucer" reports stopped cold about a year ago, you'll remember, it made almost as much news for a while as when they were first spotted. Now the people out here are speculating that maybe this disc thing came from the same source as the *saucers*, after they had a chance to look us over, study our ecology and return to their base. Cleveland is the one who started this trend of thought with his obsession that the flies I reported seeing are an attack on our planet from someone out in space.

Commander Clawson, the navy officer, doesn't know what to think. He won't believe Cleveland until he produces a specimen of the "fly-from-Mars", but then he turns around and contradicts himself by declaring a temporary quarantine until he gets further orders from Honolulu.

The reporters are damned nuisances. They're turning out reams of Sunday supplement type stuff and pestering the devil out of Sparks to let them wire it back, but our radio is now under navy control, too.

Sure is crowded in the bunk-house with the six additional people, but no one will sleep outside the screen.

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May 29—Cleveland thinks he has his specimen. He went out at dawn this morning and came in before breakfast. He's quit drinking but he hasn't slept in three days now and looks like hell. I thought he was getting his fancy imagination out of the bottle, but the soberer he got the more worried he looked over this "invasion" idea of his.

Now he claims that his catch is definitely a sample of something new under our particular sun. He hustled it under a glass and started classifying it. It filled the bill for the arthropods, class Insecta. It looked to me, in fact, just like a small, ordinary blowfly, except that it has green wings. And I mean *green*, not just a little iridescent color.

Cleve very gently pulled one wing off and we looked at it under low power. There is more similarity to a leaf than to a wing. In the bug's back is a tiny pocket, a sort of reservoir of the green stuff, and Cleve's dissection shows tiny veins running up into the wings. It seems to be a closed system with no connection with the rest of the body except the restraining membrane.

Cleveland now rests his extraterrestrial origin theory on an idea that the green stuff is chlorophyll. If it is chlorophyll, either Cleve is right or else he's discovered a new class of arthropods. In other respects the critter is an ordinary biting and sucking bug with the potentials of about a deerfly for making life miserable. The high-power lens showed no sign of unusual or malignant microscopic life inside or out of the thing. Cleve can't say how bad a bite would be, because he doesn't have his entomologist kit with him, and he can't analyze the secretion from the poison gland.

The commander has let him radio for a botanist and some micro-analysis equipment.

Everyone was so pitched up that Cleve's findings have been rather anti-climactic. I guess we were giving more credence to the space-invader theory than we thought. But even if Cleve has proved it, this fly doesn't look like much to be frightened over. The reporters are clamoring to be let loose, but the quarantine still holds.

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June 1—By the time the plane with the botanist arrived we were able to gather all the specimens of *Tabanidae viridis* (Cleveland's designation) that he wanted. Seems like every tenth flying creature you meet is a green "Tabby" now.

The botanist helped Cleve and me set up the bio kit, and he confirmed Cleve's guess. The green stuff is chlorophyll. Which makes Tabby quite a bug.

Kyser, the youngest reporter, volunteered to let a Tabby bite him. It did without too much coaxing. Now he has a little, itchy bump on his wrist, and he's happily banging away at his typewriter on a story titled, "I Was Bitten by the Bug from Space!" That was hours ago, and we haven't learned anything sinister about the green fly except that it does have a remarkable breeding ability.

One thing the reporter accomplished: we can go outside the screened quarters now without wondering about catching space-typhus.

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June 2—The quarantine was probably a pretty good idea. Cleve has turned up some dope on Tabby's life cycle that makes us glad all over that we are surrounded by a thousand miles of salt water. Tabby's adult life is only a couple of days, but she is viviparous, prolific (some thousand young at a sitting), and her green little microscopic babies combine the best survival features of spores and plankton, minus one: they don't live in salt water. But they do very well almost anyplace else. We have watched them grow on hot rocks, leaves, in the sand and best of all, filtered down a little into the moist earth.

They grow incredibly fast with a little sun, so the chlorophyll is biologically justified in the life-cycle. This puzzled us at first, because the adult Tabby turns into a blood-sucking little brute. Deprived of any organic matter, our bottled specimens die in a short time, in or out of the sunlight, indicating the green stuff doesn't provide them with much if any nourishment after they are full-grown.

Now we are waiting for a supply of assorted insecticides to find the best controls over the pests. The few things we had on hand worked quite well, but I guess they aren't forgetting our sad experience with DDT a few years back.

The Tabbies now outnumber all the other insects here, and most outside work



has been halted. The little green devils make life miserable outside the tent-houses. We have built another screened shelter to accommodate the latest arrivals. We are getting quite a fleet of amphibian aircraft floating around our lagoon. No one will be allowed to return until we come up with all the answers to the question of controlling our insect invasion.

Cleveland is trying to convince Sellers and the commander that we should get out and send in atomic fire to blow the whole island into the sea. They forwarded his suggestion to the U. N. committee which now has jurisdiction, but they wired back that if the insect is from space, we couldn't stop other discs from landing on the mainlands. Our orders are to study the bug and learn all we can.

Opinion is mixed here. I can't explain the flying disc unless it's extraterrestrial, but why would an invader choose an isolated spot like this to attack? Cleve says this is just a "test patch" and probably under surveillance. But why such an innocuous little fly if they mean business?

The newsmen are really bored now. They see no doom in the bugs, and since they can't file their stories they take a dim view of the quarantine. They have gotten up an evening fishing derby with the crew members of the planes. Have to fish after dusk. The Tabbies bite too often as long as the sun is up.

Cleve has turned into a different man. He is soft-spoken and intense. His hands tremble so much that he is conducting most of his work by verbal directions with the botanist and me to carry them out. When his suggestion about blowing up the atoll was turned down he quit talking except to conduct his work. If things were half as ominous as he makes out we'd be pretty worried.



June 4—The spray planes got here and none too soon. We were running out of drinking water. The Tabbies got so thick that even at night a man would get stung insane if he went outside the screen.

The various sprays all worked well. This evening the air is relatively clear. Incidentally, the birds have been having a feast. Now the gulls are congregating to help us out like they did the Mormons in the cricket plague. The spiders are doing all right for themselves, too. In fact, now that we have sprayed the place the spiders and their confounded webs are the biggest nuisance we have to contend with. They are getting fat and sassy. Spin their webs between your legs

if you stand still a minute too long. Remind me of real estate speculators in a land boom, the little bastardly opportunists. As you might gather, I don't care for brothers Arachnidae. They make everyone else nervous, too. Strangely, Cleveland, the entomologist, gets the worst jolt out of them. He'll stand for minutes at the screen watching them spin their nasty webs and skipping out to de-juice a stray Tabby that the spray missed. And he'll mutter to himself and scowl and curse them. It is hard to include them as God's creatures.

Cleve still isn't giving out with the opinions. He works incessantly and has filled two notebooks full of data. Looks to me like our work is almost done.



August 7, Year of our Lord 1956—To whom it will never concern: I can no longer make believe this is addressed to my friend, Ben Tobin. Cleveland has convinced me of the implications of our tragedy here. But somehow it gives me some crazy, necessary ray of hope to keep this journal until the end.

I think the real horror of this thing started to penetrate to me about June 6. Our big spray job lasted less than 24 hours, and on that morning I was watching for the planes to come in for a second try at it when I noticed the heavy spider webbing in the upper tree foliage. As I looked a gull dove through the trees, mouth open, eating Tabbies. Damned if the webs didn't foul his wings. At first he tore at them bravely and it looked like he was trying to swim in thin mud—sort of slow motion. Then he headed into a thick patch, slewed around at right angles and did a complete flip. Instantly three mammoth spiders the size of my fist pounced out on him and trussed him up before he could tear loose with his feet.

His pitiful squawking was what made me feel that horror for the first time. And the scene was repeated more and more often. The planes dusted us with everything they had, and it cut down the Tabbies pretty well again, but it didn't touch the spiders, of course.

And then our return radio messages started getting very vague. We were transmitting Cleve's data hourly as he compiled it, and we had been getting ordinary chatter and speculation from the Honolulu operator at the end of our message. That stopped on the sixth of June. Since then, we've had only curt acknowledgements of our data and sign-offs.

At the same time, we noticed that complete censorship on news of our situation and progress apparently hit all the long-wave radio broadcasts. Up to that time the newscasts had been feeding out a dilute and very cautious pabulum about our fight against Tabby. Immediately when we noticed this news blind spot Cleve went all to pieces and started drinking again.

Cleve, Sellers and I had the lab tent to ourselves, having moved our bunks in there, so we got a little out of touch with the others. It wasn't the way Sellers and I liked it, but none of us liked the trip from lab to living quarters any more, although it was only fifty feet or so.

Then Sparks moved in, too. For the same reason. He said it was getting on his nerves running back and forth to the lab to pick up our outgoing bulletins. So he shifted the generator, radio gear and all over to a corner of the lab and brought in his bunk.

By the tenth of June we could see that the spraying was a losing battle. And it finally took the big tragedy to drive home the truth that was all about us already. When the crew got ready to go out to their planes on the eleventh, everyone except the four of us in the lab tent was drafted to help clear webs between the tents and the beach. We could hear them shouting from tent to tent as they made up their work party. We could no longer see across the distance. Everywhere outside, vision was obscured by the grayish film of webs on which little droplets caught the tropical sun like a million tiny mirrors. In the shade it was like trying to peer through thin milk, with the vicious, leggy little shadows skittering about restlessly.

As usual in the morning, the hum of the Tabbies had risen above the normal jungle buzzing, and this morning it was the loudest we'd heard it.

Well, we heard the first screen door squeak open, and someone let out a whoop as the group moved out with brooms, palm fronds and sticks to snatch a path through the nightmare of spider webs. The other two doors opened and slammed, and we could hear many sounds of deep disgust voiced amid the grunts and thrashings.

They must have been almost to the beach when the first scream reached us. Cleve had been listening in fascination, and the awful sound tore him loose of his senses. He screamed back. The rest of us had to sit on him to quiet him. Then the others outside all began screaming—not words, just shattering screams of pure terror, mixed with roars of pain and anger. Soon there was no more anger.

Just horror. And in a few minutes they died away.



Sellers and Sparks and I looked at each other. Cleve had vomited and passed out. Sparks got out Cleve's whiskey, and we spilled half of it trying to get drinks into us.

Sparks snapped out of it first. He didn't try to talk to us. He just went to his gear, turned on the generator and warmed up the radio. He told Honolulu what had happened as we had heard it.

When he finished, he keyed over for an acknowledgment. The operator said to hold on for a minute. Then he said they would *try* to dispatch an air task force to get us off, but they couldn't be sure just when.

While this was coming in Cleve came to his senses and listened. He was deadly calm now, and when Honolulu finished he grabbed the mike from Sparks, cut in the TX and asked, "Are they landing discs on the mainlands?"

The operator answered, "Sorry, that's classified."

"For God's sake," Cleve demanded, "if you are ready to write us off you can at least answer our questions. Are there any of the green sonsobitches on the mainland?"

There was another little pause, and then, "Yes."

That was all. Sparks ran down the batteries trying to raise them again for more answers, but no response. When the batteries went dead he checked the generator that had kicked off. It was out of gasoline. The drums were on the beach. Now we were without lights, power and juice for our other radios.

We kept alive the first few days by staying half drunk. Then Cleve's case of whiskey gave out and we began to get hungry. Sparks and Sellers set fire to one of our straw-ticking mattresses and used it as a torch to burn their way over to the supply tent about thirty feet away. It worked fairly well. The silky webs flashed into nothing as the flames hit them, but they wouldn't support the fire, and other webs streamed down behind the two. They had to burn another mattress to get back with a few cases of food.

Then we dug a well under the floor of our tent. Hit water within a few feet. But when we cut through the screen floor it cost us sentry duty. We had to have one person awake all night long to stamp on the spiders that slipped in around the edge of the well.

Through all of this Cleveland has been out on his feet. He has just stood and stared out through the screen all day. We had to force him to eat. He didn't snap out of it until this morning.

Sparks couldn't stand our radio silence any longer, so he talked Sellers into helping him make a dash for the gas drums on the beach. They set fire to two mattresses and disappeared into the tunnel of burned webs that tangled and caved in behind them.

When they were gone, Cleveland suddenly came out of his trance and put a hand on my shoulder. I thought for a moment he was going to jump me, but his eyes were calm. He said, "Well, Fred, are you convinced now that we've been attacked?"

I said, "It makes no sense to me at all. Why these little flies?"

Cleve said, "They couldn't have done better so easily. They studied our ecology well. They saw that our greatest potential enemy was the insect population, and the most vicious part of it was the spider. *Tabanidae viridis* was not sent just to plague us with horsefly bites. Tabby was sent to multiply and feed the arachnids. There are durable species in all climates. And if our botanist were still alive he could explain in detail how long our plant life can last under this spider infestation.

"Look for yourself," he said pointing outside. "Not only are the regular pollenizing insects doomed, but the density of those webs will choke out even wind pollinated grains."

He stared down our shallow well hole and stamped on a small, black, flat spider that had slithered under the screening. "I suppose you realize the spiders got the others. Down here in the tropics the big varieties could do it by working together. Sellers and Sparks won't return. Sounds like they got through all right, but they'll be bitten so badly they won't try to get back."

And even as he spoke we heard one of the aircraft engines start up. The sound was muffled as under a bed quilt.

Cleve said, "I don't blame them. I'd rather die in the sun, too. The beach should be fairly clear of webs. We've got one mattress left. What do you say?"

He's standing there now holding the mattress with the ticking sticking out. I don't think one torch will get us through. But it will be worth a try for one more look at the sun.

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