



The Fire People

by Ray Cummings

*Improbable? Yes!
Interesting? Very!!*

The Fire People

By RAY CUMMINGS

Author of "The Golden Atom," etc.

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CHAPTER I.

THE COMING OF THE LIGHT.

The first of the new meteors landed on the earth in November, 1940. It was discovered by a farmer in his field near Brookline, Massachusetts, shortly after daybreak on the morning of the 11th. Astronomically, the event was recorded by the observatory at Harvard as the sudden appearance of what apparently was a new star, increasing in the short space of a few hours from invisibility to a power beyond that of the first magnitude, and then as rapidly fading again to invisibility. This star was recorded by two of the other great North American observatories, and by one in the Argentine Republic. That it was comparatively small in mass and exceedingly close to the earth, even when first discovered, was obvious. All observers agreed that it was a heavenly body of an entirely new order.

The observatory at Harvard supplemented its account by recording the falling, just before dawn of the 11th, of an extraordinarily brilliant meteor that flamed with a curious red and green light as it entered the earth's atmosphere. This meteor did not burn itself out, but fell, still retaining its luminosity, from a point near the zenith, to the horizon.

What the farmer saw was a huge fire burning near the center of his field. It was circular in form and about thirty feet in diameter. He was astonished to see it there, but what surprised him more was its peculiar aspect.

It was still the twilight of dawn when he reached the field. He beheld the fire first from a point several hundred yards away. As he explained it, the light—for it was more aptly described as a light than a fire—extended in parallel rays from the ground directly upward into the sky. He could see no line of demarkation where it ended at the top. It seemed to extend into the sky an

infinite distance. It was, in fact, as though an enormous search-light were buried in his field, casting its beam of light directly upward.

But more than all this, the farmer was struck by the extraordinary color of the light. At the base it was a deep, solid green. This green color extended upward for perhaps fifty feet, then it shaded into red. The farmer noticed, too, that the fire did not leap and dance with flames, but seemed rather to glow—a steady light like the burning of colored powder. In the morning half-light it threw a weird, unearthly reddish-green glow over the field.

The farmer approached to within twenty feet of the light. He looked to see what was burning, but could not determine, for the greenish base extended directly down into the ground. He noticed also that it gave out extraordinarily little heat. The morning was not exceptionally cold, yet he stood within twenty feet of the fire without discomfort.

I was on the staff of the Boston *Observer* at this time. I reached Brookline about noon of the 11th of November, and went directly to the field where the fire was burning. Nearly a thousand people were there, watching.

By daylight the fire still held its green and red color, although its light was much less intense. It held its characteristic shape. Though clearly definable, under the rays of the sun it became quite transparent. Looking through it, I could see plainly the crowd of people on the farther side of the field. The effect was similar to looking through a faintly tinted glass, except that now I noticed that the light had a sort of crawling motion, like the particles of a heavy fog. The fire came from a hole in the ground; by daylight now the hole could be seen plainly.

For some moments I stood silent, awestruck by this extraordinary spectacle. Then a man standing beside me remarked that there was no smoke. I had not thought of that before, but it was true—indeed, the fire appeared phosphorescent.

"Let's get up closer," said the man beside me.

Together we walked to within ten feet of the outer edge of the fire. We could feel its heat now, although it was not uncomfortable except when it beat directly on our faces. Standing so close, we could see down into the hole

from which the light emanated.

Lying at the bottom of the hole, perhaps ten feet below the surface, I saw the jagged top of an enormous gray sphere, burned and pitted. This was the meteor—nearly thirty feet in diameter—that in its fall had buried itself deep in the loam of the field.

As we stood there looking down into the hole some one across from us tossed in a ball of paper. It seemed to hang poised a moment, then it shriveled up, turned black, and floated slowly down until it rested on top of the sphere.

Some one else threw a block of wood about a foot long into the hole. I could see it as it struck the top of the sphere. It lay there an instant; then it, too, turned black and charred, but it did not burst into flame.

The man beside me plucked at my sleeve. "Why don't it burn?" he asked. I shook myself loose.

"How should I know?" I answered impatiently.

I found myself trembling all over with an unreasoning fear, for there was something uncanny about the whole affair. I went back to Brookline soon after that to send in the story and do some telephoning. When I got back to the field I saw a man in front of me carrying a pail of water. I fell into step beside him.

"What do you suppose it'll do?" he asked as we walked along.

"God knows," I answered. "Try it."

But when we got down into the field we found the police authorities in charge. The crowd was held back now in a circle, a hundred yards away from the light. After some argument we got past the officials, and, followed by two camera men and a motion-picture man who bobbed up from nowhere, walked out across the cleared space toward the light. We stopped about six or eight feet from the edge of the hole; the heat was uncomfortably intense.

"I'll make a dash for it," said the man with the pail.

He ran forward a few steps, splashed the water into the light, and hastily retreated. As the water struck the edge of the light there came a roar like steam escaping under tremendous pressure; a great cloud of vapor rolled back

over us and dissolved. When the air cleared I saw that the light, or the fire of this mysterious agency, was unchanged. The water dashed against it had had absolutely no effect.

It was just after this incident that the first real tragedy happened. One of the many quadraplanes that had been circling over the field during the afternoon passed directly over the light at an altitude of perhaps three thousand feet. We saw it sail away erratically, as though its pilot no longer had it under control. Then it suddenly burst into flame and came quivering down in a long, lengthening spiral of smoke.

That night the second of the meteors landed on the earth. It fell near Juneau, Alaska, and was accompanied by the same phenomena as the one we were watching. The reports showed it to be slightly smaller in size than the Brookline meteor. It burned brightly during the day of November 12. On the morning of the 13th wireless reports from Alaska stated that it had burned out during the previous night.

Meanwhile the light at Brookline was under constant surveillance. It remained unchanged in all respects.

The next night it rained—a heavy, pelting downpour. For a mile or more around the field the hissing of steam could be heard as the rain struck the light. The next morning was clear, and still we saw no change in the light.

Then, a week later, came the cold spell of 1940. Surpassing in severity the winters of 1888 and 1918, it broke all existing records of the Weather Bureau. The temperature during the night of November 20, at Brookline, fell to thirty degrees below zero. During this night the fire was seen to dwindle gradually in size, and by morning it was entirely extinguished.

No other meteors fell that winter; and, as their significance remained unexplained, public interest in them soon died out. The observatories at Harvard, Flagstaff, Cordoba, and the newer one on Table Mountain, near Cape Town, all reported the appearance of several new stars, flaring into prominence for a few hours and visible just after sunset and before dawn, on several nights during November. But these published statements were casually received and aroused only slight general comment.

Then, in February, 1941, came the publication of Professor Newland's famous theory of the Mercutian Light—as the fire was afterward known. Professor Newland was at this time the foremost astronomer in America, and his extraordinary theory and the predictions he made, coming from so authoritative a source, amazed and startled the world.

His paper, couched in the language of science, was rewritten to the public understanding and published in the newspapers of nearly every country. It was an exhaustive scientific deduction, explaining in theory the origin of the two meteors that had fallen to earth two months before.

In effect Professor Newland declared that the curious astronomical phenomena of the previous November—the new "stars" observed, the two meteors that had fallen with their red and green light-fire—were all evidence of the existence of intelligent life on the planet Mercury.

I give you here only the more important parts of the paper as it was rewritten for the public prints:

... I am therefore strongly inclined to accept the theory advanced by Schiaparelli in 1882, in which he concluded that Mercury rotates on its axis once in eighty-eight days. Now, since the sidereal revolution of Mercury, *i.e.*, its complete revolution around the sun, occupies only slightly under eighty-eight days, the planet always presents the same face to the sun. On that side reigns perpetual day; on the other—the side presented to the earth as Mercury passes us—perpetual night.

The existence of an atmospheric envelope on Mercury, to temper the extremes of heat and cold that would otherwise exist on its light and dark hemispheres, seems fairly certain. If there were no atmosphere on the planet, temperatures on that face toward the sun would be extraordinarily high—many hundred degrees hotter than the boiling point of water.

Quite the other extreme would be the conditions on the dark side, for without the sheltering blanket of an atmosphere, this surface must be exposed to the intense cold of interplanetary space.

I have reason to believe, however, particularly from my deductions made in connection with the photographs taken during the transit of Mercury over the

face of the sun on November 11 last, that there does exist an atmosphere on this planet—an atmosphere that appears to be denser and more cloudy than our own. I am led to this conclusion by other evidence that has long been fairly generally accepted as fact. The terminating edge of the phases of Mercury is not sharp, but diffuse and shaded—there is here an atmospheric penumbra. The spectroscope also shows lines of absorption, which proves that Mercury has a gaseous envelope thicker than ours.

This atmosphere, whatever may be its nature I do not assume, tempers the heat and cold on Mercury to a degree comparable to the earth. But I do believe that it makes the planet—on its dark face particularly—capable of supporting intelligent life of some form.

Mercury was in transit over the face of the sun on November 11, of last year, within a few hours of the time the first meteor fell to earth. The planet was therefore at one of her closest points to the earth, and—this is significant—was presenting her *dark face* toward us.

At this time several new "stars" were reported, flashing into brilliancy and then fading again into obscurity. All were observed in the vicinity of Mercury; none appeared elsewhere. I believe these so-called "stars" to be some form of interplanetary vehicle—probably navigated in space by beings from Mercury. And from them were launched the two meteors that struck our planet. How many others were dispatched that may have missed their mark we have no means of determining.

The days around November 11 last, owing to the proximity of Mercury to the earth, were most favorable for such a bombardment. A similar time is now once more almost upon us!

Because of the difference in the velocities of Mercury and the earth in their revolutions around the sun, one synodic revolution of Mercury, *i.e.*, from one inferior conjunction to the next, requires nearly one hundred and sixteen days. In eighty-eight days Mercury has completed her sidereal revolution, but during that time the earth has moved ahead a distance requiring twenty-eight days more before she can be overtaken.

After the first week in March of this year therefore Mercury will again be approaching inferior conjunction, and again will pass at her closest point to

the earth.

We may expect at this time another bombardment of a severity that may cause tremendous destruction, or destroy entirely life on this planet!

CHAPTER II.

THE UNKNOWN ENEMY.

When, in February, 1941, Professor James Newland issued this remarkable statement, my paper sent me at once to interview him. He was at this time at the head of the Harvard observatory staff. He lived with his son and daughter in Cambridge. His wife was dead. I had been acquainted with the professor and his family for some time. I first met his son, Alan, during our university days at Harvard. We liked each other at once, and became firm friends—possibly because we were such opposite physical types, as sometimes happens.

Alan was tall, lean and muscular—an inch or so over six feet—with the perfect build of an athlete. I am dark; Alan was blond, with short, curly hair, and blue eyes. His features were strong and regular. He was, in fact, one of the handsomest men I have ever seen. And yet he acted as though he didn't know it—or if he did, as though he considered it a handicap. I think what saved him was his ingenious, ready smile, and his retiring, unassuming—almost diffident—manner.

At the time of the events I am describing Alan was twenty-two—about two years younger than I. It was his first year out of college. He had taken a scientific course and intended to join his father's staff.

Beth and Alan were twins. I was tremendously interested in Beth even then. She seemed one of the most worth-while girls I had ever met. She was a little wisp of femininity, slender and delicate, hardly more than five feet one or two. She had beautiful golden hair and an animated, pretty face, with a pert little snub nose. She was a graduate of Vassar, and planned to take up chemistry as a profession, for she had the same scientific bent as her father and brother.

I called upon Professor Newland the evening of the day his statement was

published, and found all three discussing it.

"You want me to talk for publication, don't you, Bob Trevor?" the professor asked suddenly, after we had exchanged a few pleasantries.

He was a wiry little man, about sixty, smooth-shaven, with sparse gray hair, a rugged face of strong character, and a restless air of energy about him. He was an indefatigable worker; indeed, I am confident that, for any single continuous period of work without sleep, he could have run Alan and me into the ground and still have been comparatively fresh.

"You want an exclusive follow-up story from me to-night, don't you?" he repeated.

I admitted that I did.

"What you'll get won't be just what you expect. Look at this."

He pulled one of the evening papers toward him vigorously. "They think it is humorous. There—read that."

The item to which he pointed was a sprightly account of the weird beings that might shortly arrive from Mercury.

"They think it's a joke—some of them. There's another—read that."

The attitude of the press was distinctly an inclination to treat the affair from the humorous side. I had seen indications of that during the day at the office.

"Look here, Bob"—the professor swept all the papers aside with his hand. "You put it to them this way. Make them see this is not a prediction of the end of the world. We've had those before—nobody pays any attention to them, and rightly so. But this Mercutian Light is more than a theory—it's a fact. We fought it last November, and we'll have to fight it again next month. That's what I want to make them realize."

"They'll think it is worth being serious about," Alan put in, "if one of those lights drop into Boston or New York—especially if it happens to play in a horizontal direction instead of vertical."

We went into the whole subject thoroughly, and the professor gave me a second signed statement in which he called upon the nations of the world to prepare for the coming peril.

The actual characteristics of the Mercurian Light we had discussed before several times. A good deal had been printed about it during the previous December—without, as I have said, attracting much public attention. The two meteors had been examined. They were found to be of a mineral that could have originated on Mercury. They were burned and pitted like other meteorites by their passage through the earth's atmosphere.

Of the light itself Professor Newland had already given his opinion. It was, he said, some unknown form of etheric vibration. It radiated heat very slightly, but it had the peculiarity of generating intense heat in anything it touched directly.

"You'd better explain that, father," said Beth, when we reached this point in our summary that evening.

"Heat is the vibration of molecules of matter," the professor began.

I nodded.

"Make it clear when you write it up, Bob," Alan put in. "It's like this. All molecules are in motion—the faster the motion, the hotter the substance, and vice versa."

"And this Mercurian Light," Beth added, "has the power of enormously increasing the molecular vibration of anything it comes in contact with—"

"But it doesn't radiate much heat itself," Alan finished.

Professor Newland smiled. "The old man doesn't have much of a show, does he?"

Alan sat down somewhat abashed, but Beth remained standing beside her father, listening intently to everything he said.

"This light I conceive to be the chief weapon of warfare of the Mercurians," the professor went on. "There has been some talk of those two meteors being signals. That's all nonsense. They were not signals—they were missiles. It was an act of aggression."

I tried to get him to give some idea of what the inhabitants of Mercury might be like, for that was what my editor chiefly desired.

At first he would say nothing along those lines.

"That is pure speculation," he explained. "And very easy speculation, too. Any one can allow his imagination to run wild and picture strange beings of another world. I don't predict they will actually land on the earth—and I have no idea what they will look like if they do land. As a matter of fact, they will probably look very much like ourselves. I see no reason to doubt it."

"Like us?" I ejaculated.

"Why not?" said Alan. "Conditions on Mercury are not fundamentally different from here. We don't have to conceive any very extraordinary sort of being to fill them."

"Here's what you can tell your paper," said the professor abruptly. "Take it down."

I took out my notebook, and he dictated briskly.

"Regarding the possible characteristics of inhabitants of Mercury, it is my conception that intelligent life—let us say, human life—wherever it exists in our universe does not greatly differ in character from that of our own planet. Mars, Venus, Mercury, even Neptune, are relatively close. I believe the Creator has constructed all human life on the same general plan.

"I believe that, being neighbors—if I may be permitted the expression—it is intended that intercourse between the planets should take place. That we have been isolated up to the present time is only because of our ignorance—our inability to bridge the gap. I believe that migration, friendship, commerce, even war, between the inhabitants of different planets of our solar system was intended by Almighty God—and, in good time, will come to pass.

"This is not science; and yet science does not contradict it, in my opinion. Human life on Mercury, Venus or Mars may need bodies taller, shorter, heavier, lighter, more fragile or more solid than ours. The organs will differ from ours, perhaps, but not materially so. The senses will be the same.

"In a word, I believe that nearly all the range of diversity of human life existing on any of the planets exists now on this earth, or has existed in the past, or will exist in the future through our own development, or at most the differences would not be greater than a descent into our animal kingdom

would give us.

"Mercurians may have the sense of smell developed to the point of a dog; the instinct of direction of the homing pigeon; the eyes of a cat in the dark, or an owl in the light; but I cannot conceive of them being so different that similar illustrations would not apply.

"I believe the Creator intends intercourse of some kind, friendly or unfriendly, to take place between the worlds. As China was for centuries, so for eons we of this earth have been isolated. That time is past. The first act was one of aggression. Let us wait for the next calmly but soberly, with full realization of the danger. For we may be—indeed, I think we are—approaching the time of greatest peril that human life on this earth has ever had to face!"