FRANCIS FLAGG

THE MASTER ANTS

and other strange stories

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Francis Flagg

(George Henry Weiss: 1898-1946)

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Introduction

George Henry Weiss was an American poet, novelist and short story writer. His short fiction was mostly published in *Astounding*, *Weird Tales*, and *Amazing*. His one novel, *The Night People*, (1947) was published by Fantasy Publishing.

He used the pseudonym Francis Flagg for both his fantasy/sf stories and his poetry.

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(*as by Francis Flagg & Weaver Wright*)

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1: The Machine Man of Ardathia

Amazing Stories, Nov 1927

I DO NOT KNOW what to believe. Sometimes, I am positive I dreamed it all. But, then, there is the matter of the heavy rocking-chair. That, undeniably, did disappear. Perhaps someone played a trick on me; but who would stoop to a deception so bizarre, merely for the purpose of befuddling the wits of an old man? Perhaps someone stole the rocking-chair; but why should anyone want to steal it? It was, it is true, a sturdy piece of furniture, but hardly valuable enough to excite the cupidity of a thief. Besides, it was in its place when I sat down in the easy-chair.

Of course, I may be lying. Peters, to whom I was misguided enough to tell everything on the night of its occurrence, wrote the story for his paper, and the editor says as much in his editorial when he remarks: "Mr. Matthews seems to possess an imagination equal to that of an H. G. Wells." And, considering the nature of my story I am quite ready to forgive him for doubting my veracity.

However, the few friends who know me better think that I had dined a little too wisely or too well, and was visited with a nightmare. Hodge suggested that the Jap who cleans my rooms had, for some reason, removed the rocking chair from its place, and that I merely took its presence for granted when I sat down in the other; but the Jap strenuously denies having done so.

I must explain that I have two rooms and a bath on the third floor of a modern apartment house fronting the Lake. Since my wife's death three years ago, I have lived thus, taking my breakfast and lunch at a restaurant, and my dinners, generally, at the club. I also have a room in a down-town office building where I spend a few hours every day working on my book, which is intended to be a critical analysis of the fallacies inherent in the Marxian theory of economics, embracing at the same time a thorough refutation of Lewis Morgan's Ancient Society. A rather ambitious undertaking, you will admit, and one not apt to engage the interest of a person given to inventing wild yards for the purpose of amazing his friends.

No; I emphatically deny having invented the story. However, the future will speak for itself. I will merely proceed to put the details of my strange experience on paper— justice to myself demands that I should do so, so many garbled accounts have appeared in the press— and leave the reader to draw his own conclusions.

Contrary to my usual custom, I had dined that evening with Hodge at the Hotel Oaks. Let me emphatically state that, while it is well-known among his intimates that Hodge has a decided taste for liquor, I had absolutely nothing of an intoxicating nature to drink, and Hodge will verify this. About eight-thirty, I refused an invitation to attend the theatre with him, and went to my rooms. There I changed into smoking-jacket and slippers, and lit a mild Havana.

The rocking-chair was occupying its accustomed place near the centre of the sitting-room floor. I remember that clearly because, as usual, I had either to push it aside or step around it, wondering for the thousandth time, as I did so, why that idiotic Jap persisted in placing it in such an inconvenient spot, and resolving, also for the thousandth time to speak to him about it. With a note-book and pencil placed on the stand beside me, and a copy of Frederick Engel's *Origin of The Family, Private Property and The State*, I turned on the light in my green-shaded reading lamp, switched off all the others, and sank with a sigh of relief into the easy-chair.

It was my intention to make a few notes from Engels' work relative to plural marriages, showing that he contradicted certain conclusions of Morgan's, but after a few minutes' work, I leaned back in my chair and closed my eyes. I did not doze; I am positive of that. My mind was actively engaged in trying to piece together a sentence that would clearly express my thoughts.

I can best describe what happened, then, by saying there was an explosion. It wasn't that, exactly; but, at the time, it seemed to me there must have been an explosion. A blinding flash of light registered with appalling vividness, through the closed lids, on the retina of my eyes. My first thought was that someone had dynamited the building; my second, that the electric fuses had blown out. It was some time before I could see clearly. When I could:

"Good Lord!" I whispered weakly. "What's that?"

Occupying the space where the rocking-chair had stood (though I did not notice its absence at the time) was a cylinder of what appeared to be glass, standing, I should judge, above five feet high. Encased in this cylinder was what seemed to be a caricature of a man— or a child. I say caricature because, while the cylinder was all of five feet in height, the being inside of it was hardly three; and you can imagine my amazement while I stared at this apparition. After a while, I got up and switched on all the lights, to better observe it.

You may wonder why I did not try to call someone in, but that never occurred to me. In spite of my age —I am sixty— my nerves are steady, and I am not easily frightened. I walked very carefully around the cylinder, and viewed the creature inside from all angles. It was sustained in the centre, midway between top and bottom, by what appeared to be an intricate arrangement of glass and metal tubes. These tubes seemed to run at places

into the body; and I noticed some sort of dark fluid circulating through the glass tubes.

The head was very large and hairless; it had bulging brows, and no ears. The eyes were large and winkless, the nose well defined; but the lower part of the face and mouth ran into the small, round body with no sign of a chin. Its legs hung down, skinny, flabby; and the arms were more like short tentacles reaching down from where the head and body joined. The thing was, of course, naked.

I drew the easy-chair up to the cylinder, and sat down facing it Several times I stretched out my hand in an effort to touch its surface, but some force prevented my fingers from making contact, which was very curious. Also, I could detect no movement of the body or limbs of the weird thing inside the glass.

"What I would like to know," I muttered, "is what you are and where you come from; are you alive, and am I dreaming or am I awake?"

Suddenly, the creature came to life. One of its tentacle-like hands, holding a metal tube, darted to its mouth. From the tube shot a white streak, which fastened itself to the cylinder.

"Ah!" came a clear, metallic voice. "English, Primitive; probably of the twentieth century." The words were uttered with an indescribable intonation, much as if a foreigner were speaking our language. Yet, more than that, as if he were speaking a language long dead. I don't know why that thought should have occurred to me, then. Perhaps…

"So you can talk!" I exclaimed.

The creature gave a metallic chuckle. "As you say, I can talk."

"Then tell me what you are."

"I am an Ardathian— a Machine-Man of Ardathia. And you…? Tell me, is that really hair on your head?"

"Yes," I replied.

"And those coverings you wear on your body, are they clothes?'

I answered in the affirmative.

"How odd! Then you really are a Primitive; a Prehistoric Man," The eyes behind the glass shield regarded me intently.

"A prehistoric man!" I exclaimed. "What do you mean?"

"I mean that you are one of that race of early men whose skeletons we have dug up, here and there, and reconstructed for our Schools of Biology. Marvellous how our scientists have copied you from some fragments of bone! The small head covered with hair, the beast-like jaw, the abnormally large body and legs, the artificial coverings made of cloth… even your language!"

For the first time, I began to suspect that I was the victim of a hoax. I got up again and walked carefully around the cylinder, but could detect no outside agency controlling the contraption. Besides, it was absurd to think that anyone would go to the trouble of constructing such a complicated apparatus as this appeared to be, merely for the sake of a practical joke. Nevertheless, I looked out on the landing. Seeing nobody, I came back and resumed my seat in front of the cylinder.

"Pardon me," I said, "but you referred to me as belonging to a period much more remote than yours."

"That is correct. If I am not mistaken in my calculations, you are thirty thousand years in the past. What date is this?"

"June 5th, 1939," I replied, feebly. The creature went through some contortions, sorted a few metal tubes with its hands, and then announced in its metallic voice:

"Computed in terms of your method of reckoning, I have travelled back through time exactly twenty-eight thousand years, nine months, three weeks, two days, seven hours, and a certain number of minutes and seconds which it is useless for me to enumerate exactly."

It was at this point that I endeavoured to make sure I was wide awake and in full possession of my faculties. I got up, selected a fresh cigar from the humidor, struck a light, and began puffing away. After a few puffs, I laid it beside the one I had been smoking earlier in the evening. I found it there, later. Incontestable proof…..

I said that I am a man of steady nerves. Once more I sat down in front of the cylinder, determined this time to find out what I could about the incredible creature within.

"You say you have travelled back through time thousands of years. How is that possible?" I demanded.

"By verifying time as a fourth dimension, and perfecting devices for travelling in it."

"In what manner?"

"I do not know whether I can explain it exactly, in your language, and you are too primitive and unevolved to understand mine. However, I shall try. Know, then, that space is as much a relative thing as time. In itself, aside from its relation to matter, it has no existence. You can neither see nor touch it, yet you move freely in space. Is that clear?"

"It sounds like Einstein's theory."

"Einstein?"

"One of our great scientists and mathematicians," I explained.

"So you have scientists and mathematicians? Wonderful! That bears out what Hoomi says. I must! remember to tell… However, to resume my explanation. Time is apprehended in the same manner as is space— that is, in its relation to matter. When you measure space, you do so by letting your measuring rod leap from point to point of matter; or, in the case of spanning the void, let us say, from the Earth to Venus, you start and end with matter, remarking that between lies so many miles of space.

"But it is clear that you see and touch no space, merely spanning the distance between two points of matter with the vision or the measuring rod. You do the same when you compute time with the Sun, or by means of the clock which I see hanging on the wall there, Time, then, is no more of an abstraction than is space. If it is possible for man to move freely in space, it is possible for him to move freely in time, and we Ardathians are beginning to do so."

"But how?"

"I am afraid your limited intelligence could not grasp that. You must realise that compared with us, you are hardly as much as human. When I look at you, I perceive that your body is enormously larger than your head. This means that you are dominated by animal passions, and that your mental capacity is not very high."

That this weirdly humorous thing inside a glass cylinder should come to such a conclusion regarding me, made me smile.

"If any of my fellow citizens should see you," I replied, "they would consider you— well, absurd."

"That is because they would judge me by the only standard they know— themselves. In Ardathia, you would be regarded as bestial; in fact, that is exactly how your reconstructed skeletons are regarded. Tell me, is it true that you nourish your bodies by taking food through your mouths into your stomachs?"

"Yes."

"And are still at that stage of bodily evolution when you eliminate the waste products through the alimentary canal?"

I lowered my head.

"How revolting."

The unwinking eyes regarded me intently. Then something happened which startled me greatly. The creature raised a glass tube to its face, and from the end of the tube leaped a purple ray which came through the glass casing and played over the room.

"There is no need to be alarmed," said the metallic voice. "I was merely viewing your habitat, and making some deductions. Correct me if I am wrong,

please. You are an English-speaking man of the twentieth century. You and your kind live in cities and houses. You eat, digest, and reproduce your young, much as do the animals from which you have sprung. You use crude machines, and have an elementary understanding of physics and chemistry. Correct me if I am wrong, please."

"You are right, to a certain extent," I replied. "But I am not interested in having you tell me what I am; I know that. I wish to know what you are. You claim to have come from thirty thousand years in the future, but you advance no evidence to support the claim. How do I know you are not a trick, a fake, an hallucination of mine? You say you can move freely in time. Then how is it you have never come this way before? Tell me something about yourself; I am curious."

"Your questions are well put," replied the voice, "and I shall seek to answer them. It is true that we Machine-Men of Ardathia are beginning to move in time as well as in space, but note that I say beginning. Our Time Machines are very crude, as yet, and I am the first Ardathian to penetrate the past beyond a period of six thousand years. You must realise that a time traveller runs certain hazards. At any place on the road, he may materialise inside of a solid of some sort. In that case, he is almost certain to be destroyed.

"Such was the constant danger until I perfected my enveloping ray. I cannot name or describe it in your tongue, but if you approach me too closely, you will feel its resistance. This ray has the effect of disintegrating and dispersing any body of matter inside which a time traveller may materialise. Perhaps you were aware of a great light when I appeared in your room? I probably took shape within a body of matter, and the ray destroyed it."

"The rocking-chair!" I exclaimed. "It was standing on the spot you now occupy."

"Then it has been reduced to its original atoms. This is a wonderful moment for me! My ray has proved an unqualified success, for the second time. It not only removes any hindering matter from about the time-traveller, but also creates a void within which he is perfectly safe from harm. But to resume …

"It is hard to believe that we Ardathians evolved from such creatures as you. Our written history does not go back to a time when men nourished themselves by taking food into their stomachs through their mouths, or reproduced their young in the animal-like fashion in which you do. The earliest men of whom we have any records were the Bi-Chanics. They lived about fifteen thousand years before our era, and were already well along the road of mechanical evolution when their civilisation fell.

"The Bi-Chanics vaporised their food substances and breathed them through the nostril, excreting the waste products of the body through the pores of the skin. Their children were brought to the point of birth in ecto-genetic incubators. There is enough authentic evidence to prove that the Bi-Chanics had perfected the use of mechanical hearts, and were crudely able to make…

"I cannot find the words to explain what they made, but it does not matter. The point is that, while they had only partly subordinated machinery to their use, they are the earliest race of human beings of whom we possess any real knowledge, and it was their period of time that I was seeking when I inadvertently came too far and landed in yours."

The metallic voice ceased for a moment, and I took advantage of the pause to speak. "I do not know a thing about the Bi-Chanics, or whatever it is you call them," I remarked, "but they were certainly not the first to make mechanical hearts. I remember reading about a Russian scientist who kept a dog alive four hours by means of a motor which pumped the blood through the dog's body."

"You mean the motor was used as a heart?"

"Exactly."

The Ardathian made a quick motion with one of its hands.

"I have made a note of your information; it is very interesting."

"Furthermore," I pursued, "I recall reading of how, some years ago, one of our surgeons was hatching out rabbits and guinea pigs in ecto-genetic incubators."

The Ardathian made another quick gesture with its hand. I could see that my remarks excited it.

"Perhaps," I said, not without a feeling of satisfaction (for the casual allusion to myself as hardly human had irked my pride), "perhaps you will find it as interesting to visit the people of five hundred years from now, let us say, as you would to visit the Bi-Chanics."

"I assure you," replied the metallic voice, "that if I succeed in returning to my native Ardathia, those periods will be thoroughly explored. I can only express surprise at your having advanced as far as you have, and wonder why it is you have made no practical use of your knowledge."

"Sometimes I wonder myself," I returned. "But I am very much interested in learning more about yourself and your times. If you would resume your story … ?"

"With pleasure," replied the Ardathian. "In Ardathia, we do not live in houses or in cities; neither do we nourish ourselves as do you, or as did the Bi-Chanics. The chemical fluid you see circulating through these tubes which ran into and through my body, has taken the place of blood. The fluid is produced

by the action of a light-ray on certain life-giving elements in the air. It is constantly being produced in those tubes under my feet, and driven through my body be a mechanism too intricate for me to describe.

"The same fluid circulates through my body only once, nourishing it and gathering all impurities as it goes. Having completed its revolution, it is dissipated by means of another ray which carries it back into the surrounding air. Have you noticed the transparent substance enclosing me?"

"The cylinder of glass, you mean?"

"Glass! What do you mean by glass?"

"Why, that there," I said, pointing to the window. The Ardathian directed a metal tube at the spot indicated. A purple streak flashed out, hovered a moment on a pane, and then withdrew.

"No," came the metallic voice; "not that. The cylinder, as you call it, is made of a transparent substance, very strong and practically unbreakable. Nothing can penetrate it but the rays which you see, and the two whose action I have just described, which are invisible.

"We Ardathians, you must understand, are not delivered of the flesh; nor are we introduced into incubators as ova taken from female bodies, as were the Bi-Chanics. Among the Ardathians, there are no males or females. The cell from which we are to develop is created synthetically. It is fertilised by means of a ray, and then put into a cylinder such as you observe surrounding me. As the embryo develops, the various tubes and mechanical devices are introduced into the body by our mechanics, and become an integral part of it.

"When the young Ardathian is born, he does not leave the case in which he has developed. That case— or cylinder, as you call it— protects him from the action of a hostile environment If it were to break and expose him to the elements, he would perish miserably. Do you follow me?"

"Not quite," I confessed. "You say that you have evolved from men like us, and then go on to state that you are synthetically conceived and machine made. I do not see how this evolution was possible."

"And you may never understand! Nevertheless, I shall try to explain. Did you not tell me you had wise ones among you who experiment with mechanical hearts and ecto-genetic incubators? Tell me, have you not others engaged in tests tending to show that it is the action of environment, and not the passing of time, which accounts for the ageing of organisms?"

"Well," I said, hesitatingly, "I have heard tell of chicken's hearts being kept alive in special containers which protect them from their normal environment."

"Ah!" exclaimed the metallic voice. "But Hoomi will be astounded when he learns that such experiments were carried on by prehistoric men fifteen

thousand years before the Bi-Chanics! Listen closely, for what you have told me provides a starting-point from which you may be able to follow my explanation of man's evolution from your time to mine.

"Of the thousands of years separating your day from that of the Bi-Chanics, I have no authentic knowledge. My exact knowledge begins with the Bi-Chanics. They were the first to realise that man's bodily advancement lay in, and through, the machine. They perceived that man only became human when he fashioned tools; that the tools increased the length of his arms, the grip of his hands, the strength of his muscles. They observed that, with the aid of the machine, man could circle the Earth, speak to the planets, gaze intimately at the stars. We will increase our span of life on Earth, said the Bi-Chanics, by throwing the protection of the machine, the thing that the machine produces, around and into our bodies.

"This they did, to the best of their ability, and increased their longevity to an average of about two hundred years. Then came the Tri-Namics. More advanced than the Bi-Chanics, they reasoned that old age was caused, not by the passage of time, but by the action of environment on the matter of which men were composed. It is this reasoning which causes the men of your time to experiment with chicken's hearts. The Tri-Namics sought to perfect devices for safeguarding the flesh against the wear and tear of its environment They made envelopes— cylinders—in which they attempted to bring embryos to birth, and to rear children; but they met with only partial success."

"You speak of the Bi-Chanics and of the Tri-Namics," I said, "as if they were two distinct races of people. Yet you imply that the latter evolved from the former. If the Bi-Chanics' civilisation fell, did any period of time elapse between that fall and the rise of the Tri-Namics? And how did the latter inherit from their predecessors ?"

"It is because of your language, which I find very crude and inadequate, that I have not already made that clear," answered the Ardathian. "The Tri-Namics were really a more progressive part of the Bi-Chanics. When I said the civilisation of the latter fell, I did not mean what that implies in your language.

"You must realise that, fifteen thousand years in your future, the race of man was, scientifically speaking, making rapid strides. But it was not always possible for backward or conservative minds to adjust themselves to new discoveries. Minority groups, composed mostly of the young, forged ahead, proposed radical changes, entertained new ideas, and finally culminated in what I have alluded to as the Tri-Namics. Inevitably, in the course of time, the Bi-Chanics died off, and conservative methods with them. That is what I meant when I said their civilisation fell.

"In the same fashion did we follow the Tri-Namics. When the latter succeeded in raising children inside the cylinder, they destroyed themselves. Soon, all children were born in this manner; and in time, the fate of the Bi-Chanics became that of the Tri-Namics leaving behind them the Machine-Men of Ardathia, who differed radically from them in bodily structure, yet were none the less their direct descendants."

At last, I began to get an inkling of what the Ardathian meant when it alluded to itself as a Machine-Man. The appalling story of man's final evolution into a controlling centre that directed a mechanical body, awoke something akin to fear in my heart If it were true, what of the soul, the spirit… ? The metallic voice went on.

"You must not imagine that the early Ardathians possessed a cylinder as invulnerable as the one which protects me. The first envelopes of this nature were made of a pliable substance, which wore out within three centuries. But the substance composing the envelope has gradually been improved, perfected, until now it is immune for fifteen hundred years to anything save a powerful explosion or some other major catastrophe."

"Fifteen hundred years!" I exclaimed.

"Barring accident, that is the length of time an Ardathian lives. But to us, fifteen hundred years is no longer than a hundred would be to you. Remember, please, that time is relative: twelve hours of your time is a second of ours, and a year… But suffice it to say that very few Ardathians live out their allotted span. Since we are constantly engaged in hazardous experiments and dangerous expeditions, accidents are many. Thousands of our brave explorers have plunged into the past and never returned. They probably materialised inside solids, and were annihilated; but I believe I have finally overcome this danger with my disintegrating ray."

"And how old are you?"

"As you count time, five hundred and seventy years. You must understand that there has been no change in my body since birth. If the cylinder were everlasting, or proof against accident, I should live for ever. It is the wearing out, or breaking up, of the envelope, which exposes us to the dangerous forces of nature and causes death. Some of our scientists are trying to perfect means for building up the cylinder as fast as the wear and tear of environment breaks it down; others are seeking to rear embryos to birth with nothing but rays for covering— rays incapable of harming the organism, yet immune to dissipation by environment and incapable of destruction by explosion. So far, they have been unsuccessful; but I have every confidence in their ultimate triumph. Then we shall be as immortal as the planet on which we live."

I stared at the cylinder, at the creature inside the cylinder, at the ceiling, the four walls of the room, and then back again at the cylinder, I pinched the soft flesh of my thigh with my fingers. I was awake, all right; there could be no doubt about that.

"Are there any questions you would like to ask?" came the metallic voice.

"Yes," I said at last, half-fearfully. "What joy can there be in existence for you? You have no sex; you cannot mate. It seems to me—" I hesitated. "It seems to me that no hell could be worse than centuries of being caged alive inside that thing you call an envelope. Now, I have full command of my limbs and can go where I please. I can—"

I came to a breathless stop, awed by the lurid light which suddenly gleamed in the winkless eyes.

"Poor prehistoric mammal," came the answer, "how could you, groping in the dawn of human existence, comprehend what is beyond your lowly environment! Compared to you, we are as gods. No longer are our loves and hates the reactions of viscera. Our thoughts, out thinking, our emotions, are conditioned, moulded to the extent that we control our immediate environment. There is no such thing as—

"But it is impossible to continue. Your mentality— it is not the word I like to use but, as I have repeatedly said, your language is woefully inadequate— has a restricted range of but a few thousand words: therefore, I cannot explain further. Only the same lack— in a different fashion, of course, and with objects instead of words— hinders the free movement of your limbs. You have command of them, you say. Poor primitive, do you realise how shackled you are with nothing but your hands and feet? You augment them, of course, with a few machines, but they are crude and cumbersome. It is you who are caged alive, and not I. I have broken through the walls of your cage, have shaken off its shackles— have gone free. Behold the command I have of my limbs!"

From an extended tube shot a streak of white, like a funnel, whose radius was great enough to encircle my seated body. I was conscious of being scooped up, and drawn forward, with inconceivable speed. For one breathless moment, I hung suspended against the cylinder itself, the winkless eyes not an inch from my own. In that moment, I had the sensation of being probed, handled. Several times I was revolved, as a man might twirl a stick. Then I was back in the easy-chair again, white and shaken.

"It is true that I never leave the envelope in which I am encased," continued the metallic voice, "but I have at my command rays which can bring me anything I desire. In Ardathia are machines— it would be useless for me to describe them to you— with which I can walk, fly, move mountains, delve in the earth, investigate the stars, and loose forces of which you have no

conception. Those machines are mechanical parts of my body, extensions of my limbs. I take them off and put them on at will. With their help, I can view one continent while busily employed in another, I can make time machines, harness rays, and plunge for thirty thousand years into the past. Let me again illustrate."

The tentacle-like hand of the Ardathian waved a tube. The five-foot cylinder glowed with an intense light, spun like a top, and so spinning, dissolved into space. Even as I gaped, like one petrified, the cylinder reappeared with the same rapidity. The metallic voice announced:

"I have just been five years into your future."

"My future!" I exclaimed. "How can that be when I have not lived it yet?"

"But of course you have lived it!"

I stared, bewildered.

"Could I visit my past if you had not lived your future?" the creature persisted.

"I do not understand," I said, feebly. "It doesn't seem possible that while I am here, actually in this room, you should be able to travel ahead in time and find cut what I shall be doing in a future I haven't reached yet."

"That is because you are unable to grasp intelligently what time is. Think of it as a dimension— a fourth dimension— which stretches like a road ahead and behind you."

"But even then," I protested, "I could only be at one place at a given time, on that road, and not where I am and somewhere else in the same second."

"You are never anywhere at any time," replied the metallic voice, "save always in the past or the future. But it is useless trying to acquaint you with a simple truth, thirty thousand years ahead of your ability to understand it. As I said, I travelled five years into your future. Men were wrecking this building."

"Tearing down this place? Nonsense! It was only erected two years ago."

"Nevertheless, they were tearing it down. I sent forth my visual-ray to locate you. You were in a great room with numerous other men. They were all doing a variety of odd things. There was—"

At that moment came a heavy knock on the door of my room.

"What's the matter, Matthews?" called a loud voice. "What are you talking about, all this time? Are you sick?"

I uttered an exclamation of annoyance, because I recognised the voice of John Peters, a newspaperman who occupied the apartment next to mine. My first impulse was to tell him I was busy, but the next moment I had a better idea. Here was someone to whom I could show the cylinder, and the creature inside it; someone to bear witness to having seen it, besides myself! I hurried to the door and threw it open.

"Quick!" I said, grasping Peters by the arm and hauling him into the room. "What do you think of that?"

"Think of what?" he demanded.

"Why of that, there," I began, pointing with my finger, and then stopping short with my mouth wide open; for on the spot where, a few seconds before, the cylinder had stood, there was nothing. The envelope and the Ardathian had disappeared.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

The material for this manuscript came into my hands in an odd fashion. About a year after the Press had ceased to print garbled versions of Matthews' experience, I made the acquaintance of his friend, Hodge, with whom he had dined on that evening. I asked him about Matthews, He said:

"Did you know they've put him in an asylum? You didn't? Well, they have. He's crazy enough now, poor devil; though he was always a little queer, I thought I went to visit him the other day, and it gave me quite a shock to see him in a ward with a lot of other men, all doing something queer.

"By the way, Peters told me the other day that the apartment house where Matthews lived is to be torn down. They are going to demolish several houses along the Lake Shore, to widen the boulevard; but he says they won't wreck them for three or four years yet. Funny, eh ? Would you like to see what Matthews wrote about the affair himself?"

2: The Master Ants

Amazing Stories May 1928

A Strange Disappearance

"THE thing is a hoax."

"Palpably a hoax."

"And yet the handwriting is theirs."

"Or a forgery."

"A clever forgery then. Schultz is a handwriting expert, you know, and he declares the signatures to be genuine."

"But the thing is incredible!"

The two men looked at each other helplessly. One was a Doctor of Science; the other a nationally-known criminal lawyer. Several days before, a strange thing had happened. The nationally-known lawyer had been dining with his family in his home on Tanglewood Road, Berkeley, California, when what was at first taken to be an infernal machine of some sort dropped in the midst of the dinner table with a crash, upsetting the table and narrowly missing injuring the diners with its flying wreckage. Yet, as it was the rainy season and the evening was damp and raw, no windows had been open; nor did investigation show any of the panes or sashes to have been broken, as would have been the case had the machine been hurled through them. In short, save for some spatters of food and a few dents in the walls made by the flying metal, the room was intact. Only one door had been open at the time, the door leading into the kitchen; and the kitchen had been occupied by the cook, a middle-aged lady who had been in the employ of the lawyer for five years. Seemingly, the infernal contraption had materialized out of thin air. As if this were not startling enough, there was the manuscript.

"I found it," said the lawyer, "in the midst of the wreckage."

The third member of the party, an ordinary practising M.D., examined the manuscript with curiosity. Ift had evidently been tightly rolled and was yellow, as if with age.

"You say," he said, "that this purports to be a message from two men who dropped out of existence some twelve months ago. As I am only visiting in the East Bay for a few weeks, I am not acquainted with the facts of their disappearance. If it wouldn't be too much trouble..."

"Not at all," replied the Doctor of Science. "John Reubens was a fellow professor of mine at the University and held the chair of Physics. Raymond

Bent was a student, working his way through college by doing secretarial work for him. Reubens was a man of about forty-odd, well-known in scientific circles as a brilliant, if somewhat eccentric, physicist. In fact, he had studied under, and once collaborated with, Jacques Loeb, before the death of that great mechanist. He lived with his widowed sister in a large, old-fashioned house on Panoramic Way, and had a splendidly equipped laboratory there in which he carried out strange experiments of his own. I will frankly confess that while we acknowledged him to be a brilliant man in some respects, the majority of other professors thought him a nut because of wild theories he was wont to voice in relation to time. On the other hand, he made no secret of regarding us as so many 'Dumb Doras' without vision enough to see beyond the tips of our noses. That's the best picture I can give you of the man who went into his laboratory with his secretary on the 14th of October, 1926, and never came out again ! But let his sister give you her version of the affair. I clipped this interview with her out of the *San Francisco Examiner* and saved it."

The M.D. took and read the proffered piece of paper.

"At four o'clock Raymond Bent came and I let him in by way of the side door. He chatted with me a few minutes before going to the laboratory, where my brother was. The laboratory is on the second floor and I had occasion to pass it several times on my way to and from my bedroom. My brother never told me about his experiments, and it was understood I was never to enter his work-room. One time the door was ajar and I saw the two of them standing by some sort of a machine. That is all, except at about four-thirty, when I was passing the laboratory door on my way downstairs, I heard a terrible crash. I guess it was a pretty bad one, because all the plaster was knocked off the ceiling in the room below. When my brother didn't answer my call, I got frightened and went in. Things were upset— you know, basins and things— but neither Bent nor my brother was there."

The article went on to state that Reuben's sister admitted that the machine had also disappeared. "Some bright reporters," remarked the Doctor of Science, "got to speculating if the professor hadn't hopped off in some sort of an airship he had built; but the theory wouldn't sfewid up against the fact that while one end, of the laboratory was all glass, and the great door-like windows swung wide open, a crow could hardly have winged its way through the iron grilling, which protected them on the outside."

"Wasn't there talk of missing money in connection with the affair?" asked the M.D. "Seems to me, now, that I do recall reading of the case. Only..."

The nationally-known lawyer nodded. "Unfortunately, yes. At the time of his disappearance, the professor had drawn twenty thousand dollars of his sister's money from the hank for reinvestment. The money had been issued to

him in Treasury notes of one thousand dollars each. Some people were uncharitable enough to find in this fact full explanation of his disappearance. However, notes bearing the serial numbers of those issued .to him have never appeared on the market, as far as is known."

At this juncture the doorbell rang and a few minutes later the president of the university and two members of the faculty were ushered in. When they were seated, the lawyer addressed the gathering.

"I take it that everyone of you is aware of why I have asked you here tonight." He held up the manuscript. "My letters, I believe, explained adequately how this document came into my possession. It only remains for me to say that I have submitted it, with specimens of the handwritings of Professor Reubens and Raymond Bent, to Herman Schultz, the chirographist, and he pronounces the writing and signatures in the manuscript to be identical with that of the specimens submitted."

The president of the university nodded. "I believe that is clear to all of us. The manuscript is held to have been written in the hand of Raymond Bent, and bears both his signature and that of Professor Reubens. Very well, then. We are acquainted with the peculiar manner in which you received it, but as yet are unaware of its contents. If you would kindly read the communication to us..."

Thus bidden, the lawyer cleared his throat and read what is probably the strangest document ever penned by human hand:

The Document

WHETHER any human eye, in the age I have left behind me forever, may chance to read this writing, I do not know. I can only trust to Providence and send what I have written into the past with the fervent prayer that it will fall into the hands of intelligent people and be made known to the American public.

When I came into the Professor's laboratory on the afternoon of October 14, 1926, I had not the slightest inkling of the terrible fate that was so soon to befall me. If I had, I would probably have fled in horror from the place. The Professor was so absorbed in tinkering with the' mechanism of the machine which had engrossed his interest for nearly two years, that he did not at first notice my entrance. I picked up a book lying open on a stand to one side of him. It was H. G. Wells' *The Time Mach*ine. I smiled at the absurdity of a great professor being interested in such truck. The Professor turned and caught me smiling. "Impossible fiction," I remarked, with what, God help me, was an ill-concealed sneer.

"Fiction, yes," replied the Professor, "but why impossible?"

"Surely you don't think there is anything possible about this?" I exclaimed.

"Yes, I do."

"But to travel in something that has no reality!"

"What is reality? The earth on which we stand? The sea on which we sail? The air through which we fly? Have they any existence outside of the attributes with which our senses endow them?"

"But I can touch the earth," I protested, "I can feel the sea, but I cannot touch or handle time."

"Neither can you touch or handle space," said the Professor dryly, "but you move in it: and if you were to move, through space, say from this spot to the City Hall in Oakland, you would probably calculate the journey took you fifty minutes of time. In that sense time would have a very real significance for you, and you would have moved in it to the extent of fifty minutes. But if I ask you why it isn't possible to move ahead in time not fifty minutes, but fifty centuries, you consider me insane. Your trouble is that of most people, my boy; the lack of enough imagination to lift your brains out of the accustomed rut."

"Perhaps so," I replied, reddening angrily; "but, save in fiction, who has ever invented a time machine?"

"I have," answered the professor. He smiled at my look of disbelief. "Now this thing," he added, patting the mechanical creation affectionately, "is a Time Machine."

It was the first time he had ever told me what his invention was supposed to be.

"You mean it will travel into the future?" I asked skeptically.

"If my calculations are correct— and I have every reason to believe they are— then this machine will take us into the future."

"Us!" I echoed.

He walked over and shut the door with a bang. "Have you any objections to taking such a trip?"

"None at ail," I lied, thinking the chances of doing so were very remote.

"That is splendid. Then there is nothing to prevent our giving the machine a trial this afternoon."

The machine had two seats, with backs probably two feet high. The Professor seated me in one of them, while he occupied the other. "Just as a precaution to keep you from falling out," he smiled, buckling me in with a broad leather belt. In front of himself he swung a shelf-like section of the apparatus on which was arranged a number of dials and clock-like instruments. In some respects— save for the clocks— the shelf resembled the surface of a

radio board. Whatever cogs and wheels there might be were hidden in the body of the machine, under our feet.

"That," said the Professor, indicating a dial, registers the years and centuries ; the one next to it, the weeks, days and hours; and this handle," he touched a projecting lever, "controls the machine." Before sitting down, he had lifted the bottom from his seat and revealed below it a hollow space filled with tools and provisions. "It is the same with your chair," he said with satisfaction, "and if you examine the leather belt, which holds you in, you will discover that it also acts as the holster for a Colt automatic and a box of spare cartridges." He settled himself comfortably in his seat and grasped the lever. "Are you ready, my boy?"

So business-like was his manner, so self-assured, that for a moment a qualm of doubt assailed me. What if the confounded thing were to work! Then my commonsense got the upper hand again. Of course it wouldn't ! Already I began to feel sorry for the professor. At my nod of assent, he pressed down on the lever. The machine shook; there was a purring noise; hut that was all. I smiled, partly with relief, partly with derision. "What's the matter?" I asked ; and even as I spoke the whole room spun like a giddy top and dissolved into blackness. The roaring of a million cataracts dazed and stunned me. There was an awful sensation of turning inside out, a terrible jolt, and then it was all over and I was lying sprawled out and half senseless in a wreck of disintegrating iron and steel. My hrst thought, of course, was that we were still in the laboratory. The machine had turned over, or exploded, and nearly killed me. That's what came of listening to bughouse professors and their crazy inventions! I felt my head and limbs blindly. Sound enough, I seemed, save for a few scratches and bruises. I struggled to sit up ; as I did so, I came face to face with an old man with a tangled mane of gray hair and an unkempt beard. It was several minutes before I realized that I was looking at the professor. Even as I did so, I became conscious of the fact that black whiskers hung down on my own breast and that the top of my head was as bald as a billiard ball. I looked around and saw that we were lying on a prairie-like expanse of country. Some trees were far off to one side and the immediate plain was covered with stunted bushes and tufts of grass. Anything more different from the laboratory could not well be imagined. As I stared stupefied, not yet realizing the awful truth, the Professor, gave a deprecating cough.

"I'm afraid," he said in a voice that was his, yet curiously changed, "I'm afraid I overlooked a very vital thing." He shook his head. "How I was so stupid as not to think of it, I can't understand."

"Think of what?" I mumbled.

"Of the almost elementary fact that as we journeyed into the future our bodies would age."

HIS words brought me to my senses. Incredible as it seemed, this was the future. At least we had come to rest on some other spot than that of the laboratory. And undoubtedly physical changes had taken place in the Professor and myself.

"We must return at once!" I cried.

"Of course," replied the Professor, "at once. But how?"

I looked at him dumbly.

"As you see," he remarked, picking up a piece of rusted, crumbling metal, "the machine just kept going until it was so old it fell to pieces. My boy, we have had a lucky escape."

"A lucky escape!" I echoed.

"Yes; for if the machine had not worn out when it did we would have gone on until we perished from old age."

"But I thought you told me once that old age was not caused by the passing of time."

"I did ; but you can readily understand that in our journey through time we encountered more or less friction from environment. Of course the faster we traveled through a century, say, the less action of environment on our bodies there would be in a given period of time. But still there would be enough to age us after awhile. At least, such seems to have been the case."

"How far have we come?" I asked.

"I don't know. All my instruments are destroyed. As you see, the machine is junk,"

"But we can build another."

"What with?"

I groaned. Machine, tools, weapons, all were gone. God knows how many centuries in the future, we stood on a bleak prairie, middle-aged and old, the rotting clothes falling from our backs, with only our bare hands to protect us from whatever dangers might lurk for us in this new and unknown age. With despairing eyes I stood up and scanned the horizon. "Look, professor, look!" I cried, seizing him by the shoulder. "Aren't those men running towards us?"

The professor focussed his eyes in the direction my finger pointed. Perhaps a half mile away, having seemingly just topped a rise, was a body of what appeared to be men. Even at that distance something about them looked peculiar; and when they came nearer we saw that they were running with bowed backs, their heads jutting at almost right angles with their bodies, and their arms dangling loosely in front of them.

"Those are the queerest looking men I've ever seen," I said in alarm, looking around for a weapon to defend myself with in case of attack, and plucking up the only thing available, a piece of rusted iron. The professor did likewise. Thus armed, we stood up to await their approach, for there was no place to hide and nothing behind which we could find shelter. Perhaps three hundred yards away the odd men spread out into a semi-circle. There were probably twenty-five or thirty of them, naked, with not even a breach-clout, shaggy of hair and beard, and with hair almost as heavy as fur running down their hacks and on the weather sides of their arms and legs. They continued coming at a fast gallop ; but just when it seemed they would run on and over us, they reared back— much as do horses when reined in— and came to an abrupt stop, shaking their heavy manes, and pawing at the ground with their feet,

"Very peculiar; very peculiar indeed," said the Professor thoughtfully. "Except for the clearly defined features of their faces and the general structure of their bodies, one would not take them for men at all."

"They seem more like apes," I retorted. "I hope they're not as savage as they look. Speak to them, Professor, before they start something, and see if they can't talk."

The Professor held up one hand in a peaceful gesture and took a step forward. He raised his voice so as to make it carry across the thirty or forty feet which still separated the shaggy men from us.

"We are American travelers!" he shouted. "Is there any among you who can talk English?"

The only response to this was a snorting and a rearing, accompanied by a rustling sound which affected the nerves disagreeably. Several of the shaggy men broke from the circle, doing a great deal of plunging and rearing before reluctantly coming back into formation again.

"By God, Professor," I said fervently, the goose-flesh appearing on my body, "I don't like this at all."

The Professor repeated his question in French, Spanish, Italian ; he asked it in Portuguese, and in what he later told me were several Indian dialects; but all to no purpose. Only every time he paused to catch his breath, there came that dry rustling as of the rasping of metal on metal. Suddenly he stepped back and caught me by the shoulder.

"Those creatures," he whispered, gesturing towards the shaggy men, "are controlled."

"Controlled!" I exclaimed. "What do you mean?"

"That there is something on their shoulders."

I thought the Professor was taking leave of his senses. "What could it possibly be," I began, then stopped, for the shaggy men were in motion. They divided, one group going to the right of us and the other to the left. In our rear they joined ranks and made us retreat before them. It was then I caught my first glimpse of the unbelievable riders that perched on their shoulders and rode them, much as human beings ride horses. Long antennae reached down on either side of the shaggy men's faces, gripping the corners of their mouths and serving to guide them as with bit and bridle. Other antennae waved in the air, or rubbed one on the other, producing the rasping noise which had so grated on ray nerves. The bodies to which these antennae were attached were about a foot in length.

"In the name of God, what are they, Professor?"

I screamed, half raising my piece of iron as if to throw it at the slowly advancing horrors. But the Professor gripped my arm. "Don't start fighting," he warned sternly, "unless you have to. As to what they are, I'm not certain, but I helieve them to be some sort of ant-like insects."

We retreated, slowly at first, then at a brisk walk, finally at a trot. When we moved in a given direction the insects were content to keep their steeds at a distance; but when we veered from it they urged on the shaggy men to head us off.

"I believe those insects are driving us in front of them as men herd cattle," gasped the Professor.

We topped a rise and saw stretching away before us a level plain. Far out on this plain— several miles away, perhaps— were numerous mounds, and it did not take us long to suspect that they were our destination. Several times the Professor sank to the earth, utterly winded, unable to- run another step. At such times. I stood over his body with my iron club, determined to sell our lives dearly, but' there was no need to fight. The shaggy men were brought to a halt and their uncanny riders waited patiently until the Professor could regain his feet, when we were once more urged ahead at a brisk pace.

Night had fallen and it was almost too dark to see when we finally staggered through a narrow gap into a large enclosure and were left to our own devices. The splash of water led us to a stream, where we slaked our thirst and bathed our sore and swollen feet; and then, too miserable and tired to care what further happened to us, we huddled together for warmth and fell asleep.

SEVERAL hours later, the Professor and I awoke, chilled to the bone. And no wonder! For we were practically naked, only shreds of cloth clinging to our backs. The moon was riding high overhead, making the enclosure as light as day. Now and then the silence would be broken with a shrill scream or a heavy snort. Once or twice we heard the metallic slithering of antennae; and once, in looking up, I saw an insect crawling on top of a mound, its sinuous body etched sharply against the sky. I shivered with more than the cold.

"Professor," I whispered, "is this a nightmare or am I really awake?"

"I'm very much afraid that both of us are wide awake," said the Professor with a sigh.

"But it doesn't seem possible," I exclaimed. "Those bugs... My God, Professor, what has happened to the world !"

The Professor pulled thoughtfully at his unkempt beard. "I don't know. In our day there were scientists who held insects to be a growing menace to man's rule. Perhaps...But you could see for yourself that those ants rode men!"

"Were they men?"

"Yes; I believe they were."

"But their hair?"

"Could be accounted for by the fact that they were exposed, naked, to all kinds of weather. The fit. in this case, the strong, hairy ones, would survive and breed. A few centuries of such breeding could possibly produce the type we saw."

The thought of a world in which insects were the dominant species and men subject to them as beasts of burden, filled me with horror. If such were the case, what would our fate be? In spite of the chill night wind, in spite of the fact that we were cold and hungry, I dreaded the morning. But daylight came at last, and then we were better able to examine our surroundings. The enclosure was probably a half mile square and fenced in with an irregular line of mounds anywhere from ten to twenty feet high. Across the stream from us, bedded against the walls of a mound, were several hundred of the shaggy men. Soon after daylight they were afoot and came down to the stream to drink, wading into the water, in some cases, up to the waist, and drinking with an animal-like abandonment that filled me with disgust. It couldn't be passible that those creatures had once been human beings like the professor and myself. No, no! It seemed incredible that mankind could ever have fallen so low.

Some of the shaggy men crossed the stream to view us more closely. Most of these were females, stooping forward as they walked. One of them came quite dose to us, uttering plaintive cries, and the Professor stepped forward in an attempt to speak to her. At this a great hulking bull of a fellow, with fiery

red hair that glinted in the sun, and who would have stood well over six feet if he had straightened up, rushed at the Professor with a roar. The latter retreated hastily; whereupon the leader of the herd— for you could have called the gathering of shaggy men nothing else than a herd, and the red-haired giant the leader of it— turned upon the females, and with blows of his fists and sundry kicks of his splay feet, drove them back across the stream where they all, men, women and children, took to grubbing in the ground for some sort of roots.

"And you call them human," I said to the Professor.

"They once were."

I shook my head. "Those creatures are bent almost double. Even the children are so formed, and the posture seems a natural one to them."

"Perhaps they were bred for that characteristic."

"Bred!"

"Why not ? If things are as I suspect, then those men have become the domestic animals of the insects. In the beginning they were probably bent double by bearing the weight of their riders. Acquired characteristics are, of course, generally conceded to be uninheritable, but little is known of the possibilities of variation— what effects the constant doing of a thing may have on the germ-plasm. It is possible that mutations with certain peculiarities of structure were born and men, such as you see, bred from them."

Before I could make reply, we had our first leisurely view of one of the ant-like insects. It suddenly appeared on top of a ten-foot mound a few yards from where we stood. Its body was in three segments of an almost metallic blackness, being raised, on stilted feet, about eight inches from the ground. Four feelers, or antennae, waved in the air or rasped one on the other, and were- attached to a mobile head. There was no 'indication of eyes, yet the weird thing paused in one spot for all of five minutes, as if intently regarding us, and I, for one, believed that it could see. Other insects appeared on the mounds, and soon the air was full of metallic slithering. At the sound, the males of the shaggy herd pricked up their ears, stamped the ground with their feet, and then continued feeding. On the other hand, the females ran towards the mounds, stretching up their hands to the insects on top of them, and calling out with imploring cries. Then we witnessed a strange sight. The ants crawled down the wall in one stream, paused beside a female for a moment or two, and then crawled up the wall again in another. It was a few minutes before the reason for this dawned on me.

"Good Lord, Professor!" I exclaimed suddenly, "they're milking them!"

It was true. The females of the shaggy men were so many cows being milked. Again the horror of our position came over me. We were castaway in a

future age where man no longer was lord and master. Instead, he was a beast to he driven like a horse, milked like a cow, and— since ants ate meat, or used to— slaughtered like an ox. I wiped the cold sweat from my forehead.

"Professor," I said, "we must escape from here."

"Of course," replied the Professor; "but how— and where to?"

There was no answer to make. The mounds hemmed us in ; and even if we could get beyond them and away from our present captors, there were doubtless other mounds and other insects who would capture us. If the world was really in the hands of ants, then we were animals to be hunted down, tamed or killed. This age into which we had blundered was not safe for man— at least, not for civilized man. I closed my eyes to shut out the horrible sight of crawling insects. I tried to shut my ears to the sound of insane slithering, but heard readily enough when the Professor said somewhat nervously, "My boy, I believe they're coming over here." Three of the ants had mounted on the backs of shaggy men and were trotting them towards us. I looked desperately around for my piece of iron. It was gone. So was the Professor's. Someone or something had removed them while we slept. Nor was there anything else that could be used as a weapon. In this dilemma we turned and ran, but were soon overtaken. Two of the shaggy men closed in on me, while the third held the Professor powerless. I fought like a fiend ; but the four hands of the shaggy men were like iron bands, the grip of their fingers like vises. In a few minutes I was helpless. Then came the crowning horror. One of the insects dismounted from the hack of its steed and climbed on mine. At the feel of its suction-like legs on my flesh I went crazy. The muscles writhed in horrified protest under my skin. I bit and screamed and lashed out with my feet. All to no avail. Relentlessly, the loathsome thing clambered upwards until it had settled itself; firmly on neck and shoulders. Two antennae reached down my cheeks, gripping the corners of my mouth and clamping themselves there. Almost at the same instant the shaggy men loosed their grip of me and I was free. For a moment I stood still, dazed and trembling; then the antennae gave a pull at my mouth, wrenching the head back with a cruel jerk. With a scream of pure terror, I plunged forward in a mad leap, clawing upwards with my hands at the awful incubus on my shoulders, tearing futilely at the antennae which gripped my mouth. And as I fought to unseat the inhuman rider perched on my shoulders, I knew what I was: I was a horse being broken, a wild mustang, knowing for the first time the torture of bit and saddle, of spur and quirt; I was an inferior animal being conquered, beaten, trained by a superior one. The blind, unreasoning fear I felt, a thousand wild horses being brought under the yoke of all-powerful man must have felt. I ran— it seemed for ages— goaded, spurred, until I could run no more. My gait slackened, became a trot, a walk.

Finally I stood still, frothing blood and saliva at the mouth, gulping painfully for air, trembling in every limb. The incredible insect breathed me for a few minutes before again urging me into a trot. I made no protest. I was beaten, cowed. The antenna on the left pulled; I went to the left. The one to the right tugged; I went to the right. My rider drove me past mounds where ants perched watching, much as cowboys of the past were wont to straddle corral fences and observe one of their number perform. They slithered what was undoubtedly their applause. For about twenty minutes I was put through my paces; made to walk, canter, circle, wheel and stop at command. Finally the insect slid from my shoulders and I sank to the ground, too miserable and distraught to care whether I lived or died. I flinched and closed my eyes when it patted me with its antennae and slithered soothingly, much as a man might pat a horse and at the time say, "There, there, old boy, don't be afraid." Afterwards a quantity of raw vegetables and what appeared to be coarse grain cakes were tossed to me and the insect went away. I lay there for a long time, hardly stirring a finger, when the Professor came up and sat down beside me.

"No," he said, "they didn't ride me. Too old, perhaps."

He picked up a grain cake and gnawed at it hungrily.

"Try one, my boy, they're not half bad. Besides you'll feel better if you eat something."

I suppose it seems queer to tell it, but we sat there on the rough grass, with the slithering ants coming and going about their business, and ate those cakes. Neither one of us had tasted food since the day before— or was it several centuries before?— and were half starved. Only hunger could make eating at all bearable with my sore and lacerated , mouth. Suddenly the Professor spoke to me in an odd tone.

"My dear boy, I don't like to arouse any false hopes, but will you take a look at that thing in the air and tell me what you think it is."

I glanced up apathetically enough; then at sight of what I saw I leaped to my feet with a wild cry; for, soaring through the air at a height of about seventy feet from the ground was a craft of shining metal.

"An airship!" I shouted deliriously. "An airship !"

2450 A.D.

YES, it was an airship. There could be no doubt of that. And where there was an airship, there must be human beings, men.

"Then civilized people are still living on the earth," cried the Professor exultantly. "Quick, my boy, shout and attract the driver's attention."

He had no need to urge me. Pain, weariness and despair were forgotten as I waved madly. "Help!" I shouted, dancing up and down. "Help!"

The strange craft jerked to a pause in mid-air, hung motionless for a moment, then sank directly earthwards for what must have been forty feet or more. Over the side looked a girt, her beautiful face wearing a look of amazement.

"For God's sake, help us!" I shouted again, "or the ants..."

I got no further, fear throttling my voice, for the ants were coming. Thousands of them suddenly appeared in sight, literally covering the tops and sides of the mounds. They saw the airship; there could be no doubt of that. A half million antennae reached threateningly heavenwards, and the angry slithering of them appalled the ears. The woman shouted something, what I could not hear, and waved her hand. Even as some of the insects surged down from the mounds and made for us, the airship dropped. It was a close thing. We leaped and clutched the metal sides, hanging on with the grin of desperation, as the strange craft brushed the earth like a feather and soared aloft again. I felt the sucking claws of an insect fasten to one leg and kicked out in a vain endeavor to rid myself of it. Suddenly a withering ray flashed from a cone in the girl's hand and played on the insect. There was an acrid smell of burning, a little flash of light, and the grip on my leg relaxed. With a sob of relief, I stumbled over the side of the car and fell in a heap on the floor. "Safe, my boy, safe!" exulted the Professor, who had preceded me then, turning to the girl, who was regarding us with wide-eyed wonder, he asked. "What year is this?"

"2450," she answered in perfect English.

"A.D.?"

"Yes."

"Hum," muttered the Professor, making a quick mental calculation. "Five hundred and twenty-five years in the future."

But I was too busy adjusting myself to this sudden change in our fortunes to give him much heed Far below us the earth was unrolling like a checkered carpet, mounds, hillocks, trees sweeping by at considerable speed. What power was driving the airship. I wondered. There was no sign of a propeller; neither did the craft possess wings and a rudder; nor any of the other properties associated in my mind with flying machines. Only the girl stood in front of a square box and-now and then shifted a small lever. She was, I judged, twenty-one or two, with red-gold hair, eyes like slanted almonds, and skin of yellow ivory. Her lithe body was of medium height and clad in a loose-flowing robe of some scarlet-colored material.

"Where are we going?" I asked her.

"To the Castle," she answered.

As she regarded me, I realized for the first time that I was naked; but the Professor seemed blissfully unconscious of the lack of any clothes.

"We have to thank you for rescuing us from a very dangerous and awkward position," he said courteously.

"I took you for beast men at first," she replied, "and if you hadn't called out in English, I shouldn't have stopped. Tell me, where do you come from and how did you fall into the hands of the Master Ants?"

"We came from the past," replied the Professor, "and landed on the plain about seven miles from where you picked us up. The insects— what you call Master Ants— captured us there."

"The past?" questioned the girl. "Where is that? Over the sea?"

"No," answered the Professor. "In another age. an earlier one than this. Out of the past, you know."

The girl didn't know. She stared at the Professor as if she thought the hardships we had undergone had unbalanced his mind. As for me, I was content to sink into a seat and wonder what kind of place was this Castle she was taking us to, and what manner of people were they who inhabited it in the year of our Lord, 2450. I had not long to wonder.

About an hour's flight brought us in sight of a vast structure which crowned the top of a high hill. Its walls glittered like dull silver under the rays of the afternoon sun, and its roof seemed to be one large garden or park. Never had I seen anvthing more beautiful or bizarre. Here and there domes of silver towered among swaying palm trees, spruce and live oak. The car swooped down like a homing bird and came gently to rest on a wide plaza and was immediately surrounded by a crowd of curious people of all ages and both sexes. The women were clad in gay-colored dresses; the men wearing white trousers, with soft linen tunics. Both men and women went bareheaded and barefooted, and the men were clean-shaven. At sight of us, the women and children fell back with cries of alarm, and some of the men made as if they would attack us forthwith; but the girl cried out that we were not beast men, but English-speaking travelers whom she had rescued from the Master Ants. At this announcement hostility ceased, but the amazement with which we were regarded deepened.

"How is this possible?" said one handsome young fellow. "Save for ourselves, there are no English-speaking people left alive in the two Americas, and for three hundred years no word has come from Europe. The Master Ants rule this country, and perhaps the world. Where, then, could these men have come from unless it be from the ranks of the beast men?"

"We are Time Travelers," began the Professor; "we come from..."

But a tall, commanding man of about sixty interrupted him.

"Our guests are worn and weary. Time enough for questions after they have bathed and fed and rested. Come, come! Are we of Science Castle so inhospitable as to leave two wayfarers to faint at our very door?"

At these words, the young fellow fell back abashed and willing hands lifted lis from the aircraft. It is hard to tell of the exquisite enjoyment of the next few hours. We were led into a central roof building of dull silver and bathed and washed. Soothing lotions were applied to ray wounds. Our bodies were anointed with refreshing balms and swathed in soft robes. Tangled beards were clipped to the skin and our faces shaved. After all these ministrations, I glanced in a mirror and saw the reflected features of a man of about forty-odd, bald of head, yet not entirely unreminiscent of the youth I once had been. Food was served to us as we lay on soft couches. First a thick broth, aromatic, satisfying; then various dishes whose names I did not know; but all were palatable. After eating, we fell asleep and slept, we discovered later, until eight o'clock of the next morning.

Science Castle

WITHOUT a doubt, our couches had been enclosed by four walls when we fell asleep. What miracle was this? We were lying in an open space with only some green shrubbery between us and the wide plaza on one side, and walks and gardens on the other three. Children were romping in the plaza, evidently laughing and shouting, yet their voices came to us but faintly.

"I suppose we're not dreaming," said the Professor. He got up and took a few steps forward; then came to an abrupt halt. "This is very odd," he said ; and even as he spoke, the four walls magically enclosed us, the Professor standing with his face against one of them.

"Good morning," said a laughing voice. I forgot your room was to be left opaque and turned on the ray."

It was the handsome youth who had questioned us the day before.

"The ray?" asked the Professor.

"Oh, I forgot!" exclaimed the youth. "Everything is probably strange to you. The ray is what makes the walls transparent, so that one can look through them."

"But what is it?"

The youth looked puzzled. "Why I don't know that I can tell you, offhand." He scratched his head in perplexity. "I guess it's like electricity used to be. Thousands of people turned it on every day, but nobodv could tell yon what it was."

We dressed ourselves in white trousers and soft tunics of a fair fit and followed him to a central dining room. It was strange to walk through what was undoubtedly the corridor of a large building and yet never be certain whether one were indoors or out. Two or three hundred people were breakfasting in this central room and I noticed that they seemed to be a mingling of all races. There were some with the slanted eyes and yellow skin of the Chinese; others, plainly, had more than a drop of negro blood in their veins; yet all were mingling with their white companions 'on terms of perfect equality. In Science Castle, I was to learn later, no distinction was made as to race or color. Among the early inhabitants had been numbered Japanese, Negroes, and Chinese, as well as whites. A common foe, a common vital danger had served to weld the various strains together. "Race and color antagonisms," a Scientian told us, "would have proved fatal to the small community. Of necessity a mingling of races took place. My grandfather was a negro. The girl who rescued you has Chinese blood in her veins. Whatever differences existed among our people in the early days has been ironed out by centuries of a common culture and environment." But I am anticipating.

Breakfast consisted of fruit, cereal, scrambled eggs, and milk, and we served ourselves cafeteria fashion. After eating, we repaired to the plaza where several hundred people were gathered, seated on the grass or on rustic benches. Seats were given us on what was evidently the raised platform of a speaker's rostrum. The tall, elderly man who had spoken for our welfare the night before, received us kindly.

"My name," he said, "is Soltano, Director of Science in Science Castle. I am speaking for my companions as well as for myself when I assure you that you are welcome to our home and refuge, and need fear no harm. However, you must realize that it has been centuries since strangers like yourselves have entered Science Castle, and understand that your rescue and coming has caused us untold amazement. Now that you are clothed and shaved, we readily perceive you to be, not beast men, but civilized beings like ourselves. Yet are we puzzled as to whence you could have come."

The Professor replied courteously: "My companion and myself thank you for your kindnesses to us and gratefully receive your assurances of future asylum and safety. A little of your curiosity, I can understand, and shall do my best to satisfy it."

He had raised his voice so that the words might carry to the people below.

"There is no need to pitch your voice above its ordinary key," explained Soltano. "This rostrum is really an instrument which broadcasts and magnifies it. Everyone— even those of us who are employed elsewhere— will pick up what you say by means of ear-phones."

I noticed, then, that the attentive people in the plaza were holding round devices to their ears and ceased wondering how some of them, leaning on the parapet two hundred yards away, expected to hear. "Splendid," said the Professor. "Some sort of an amplifying, radio machine, I see." He beamed on Soltano. "I merely talk to you, is that it? and all will hear." For a moment I thought he was going to interrupt the interview long enough to examine the platform ; but if he wanted to do so, he conquered the temptation. "My name," be said, "is John Reubens, late Professor of Physics at the University of California, and this lad here is Raymond Bent, my secretary. We are Time Travellers."

"Time Travellers!" echoed Soltano.

"Yes," replied the Professor, "from the year 1926. This means, of course, that we have come five centuries and a quarter out of the past."

There was a stir in the crowd below. Soltano looked amazed, as well he might. "This is a strange thing you are telling us. John Reubens," he said at last, "and well-nigh incredible. Much simpler would it be to believe that you had managed to come over the sea from Europe or from Asia. Never have we listened to such a tale before."

"Nor anybody else," replied the Professor with dignity, "as we are the first human beings ever to make such a trip."

"And how did you come?"

"By means of a Time Machine, the remains of which lie rotting on the spot where the Master Ants discovered us." He then proceeded to tell of the building of the Time Machine, of our incredible rush through space and of our awakening in another age. Then he told of our subsequent capture by, and experiences with, the insects. When he had finished, excited talking and gesturing broke out among the people below. Evidently there were doubting Thomases among them, who discounted our story. But the Professor was not disturbed.

"If you are amazed at what I have told you," he said, "how much more amazed are my companion and myself to find ourselves in a future where ants ride men as steeds and human beings live penned in such a castle as this. Such a state of affairs was not even dreamed of when we left our own day and age. Naturally we are curious to learn how it has come about."

"OUR historians are not quite clear as to that," replied Soltano. "If you came through time from 1926, then you left your period nine years before the ants began their attack on mankind. It was in 1935 that the papers printed news of a queer happening in South America. Natives came fleeing from the jungles with stories of how the white ants were eating everything up in the forests— even men! In the United States no one paid much attention to the

news. The world, at that time, was in a state of political unrest and the government and people were watching Europe and building up a great air force, they were too busy to give heed to preposterous yarns emanating from Latin America. A year later the newspapers again flamed into headlines with news from Argentina, Peru, and Brazil. Small towns in the interior of these countries were being devastated. It had always been known that termites would destroy things carelessly left exposed in the fields or jungles; hut now they were eating up brick and stone. Buildings collapsed at the touch of a hand. Men woke and turned to wake a sleeping companion who dissolved into dust at a pressure. Sunday supplements carried lurid stories and sensational pictures for the edification of their readers. Then all such nonsense was swept into oblivion by the fact that Poland declared war on Lithuania, Russia moved to intervene, and Italy and France came to death-grips for five bloody years. In the United States ensued what were called prosperous times. Munition factories provided well-paid work for thousands of workers and made millions of dollars for hundreds of millionaires. Everybody was busily employed and had no time to think of crazy happenings reported from crazier spiggoty republics. Only a few scientists from the Smithsonian and other institutes went down to South America to investigate and wrote back long reports which were read with foreboding by a few learned men and ignored by everybody else. The papers they wrote — the records of these days.' — are preserved in our library."

"But the Master Ants," asked the Professor, "where did they come from, and how did they overwhelm the United States?"

Soltano waved his hand. "I am coming to that. The Master Ants were first noticed six years after the depredations of the white ants commenced. How they came nobody knows. Only in the nests of the termites, m the little galleries and chambers underground, something stupendous was taking place, something fraught with disaster for the human race. During thousands of years the white ants had undoubtedly been changing, evolving, acquiring, God only knows, what knowledge. It is all speculation, of course, but you doubtless recollect how the bees, by feeding their larvae different foods, will produce at Will a queen, a drone, or a worker. Well, the white ants had discovered how to make such food — and to feed it to their larvae. At any rate, the Master Ants appeared. No one had ever seen them before. They swarmed down from the jungles by the hundreds of thousands, and wherever they went the people were stricken and fell in the fields and the streets We now know that the termites bit them, injecting a subtle poison into their systems which induced a species of paralysis; but at the time it was only known that of every three that fell, two were devoured, and that the third one recovered, stupid, beast-like,

to become the creature of the Master Ants. In vain the southern republics sent their soldiers to battle the insects. Guns crumbled to pieces in their hands. Armies lay on the ground to bivouac and only one soldier out of every three ever rose again— and he rose to bear an ant on his shoulders and chase his fleeing countrymen. Panic spread. Natives fled to the seashore and put to sea in all kinds of unseaworthy crafts— only to drown by the thousands. When the Master Ants finally occupied the crumbling ruins of Rio de Janeiro, the whole world was forced to realize that something terrible was happening in South America; and when fifteen years later, all South America having come under their sway, the termites were reported to be making inroads on the Canal Zone, a feeling of uneasiness swept through the people of the United States. Still it seemed impossible thai the mighty northern nation could be invaded and flouted by such an insignificant thing as an ant. Newspapers ran articles written by government experts, pointing out how absurd it was to even entertain the thought. South America had succumbed, said the experts, because she had been a tropical wilderness without proper chemical defense. Elaborate plans were drawn up, showing how the border states were protected from invasion by systems of pipes and sprays; showing how fleets of airship were prepared to drop tons of chemicals and explosives. Only the scientists who had studied the tactics and methods of the ants knew how futile these preparations were; but they and their suggestions were ignored by the petty politicians and nincompoops who were directing itie affairs of the country."

Soltano paused. I stared at him, wide-eyed.

"And the ants came," breathed the Professor.

"Yes, the ants came. Millions of them were killed with explosives, with gases and poisonous chemicals, but their numbers seemed as exhaustless as the sands on the seashore. In the space of a year they ate up the pipes and put the sprays out of commission. But you will have to read the history of those times for a more detailed account. Then you will learn how the United States soldiers marched against the invaders and met the same fate as had previously befallen the armed forces of South America and Mexico. The scientists had suggested that the soldiers go mailed in a composite metal they had made from the blend of three other metals, comprehensive experiments having shown it to be the only substance the ants could nor devour. Guns, pipes, everything possible, they said, should he protected with a casing of this metal. No one paid any attention to them. Rebuffed, a group of them interested financial backing and retired to this hill. Here they congregated machines and Workers and started building the castle you now see. It was intended at first for an observation base, merely; an outpost, as it were, from which to spy on

arid study the habits of the insects. But as the years passed, and it become increasingly clear that the country was doomed, the place became thought of as a permanent home and refuge. Commenced in 1955, it was not finished until the year 2000. For some reason the ants were, comparatively speaking, slow in infesting North America. Perhaps the cooler climate had something to do with this. For instance, they swept through south Texas and all of the southern states before they fared further north. When their coming finally drove the inhabitants of this vicinity panic stricken before them, the scientists— those of them who still lived— entered the Castle, accompained by the workers and their families, and we, whom you see today, are their descendents."

"But the rest of the people!" cried the Professor. "What became of them?"

"They went crazy with fear," replied Soltano. "For fifty years the United States was increasingly the habitat of terrified mobs. The economic life of the country became disrupted. Citizens, white and black, fled from the southern states and added to the congested panic of northern cities. Famine raised its gaunt head ; crime became prevalent. Hundreds of thousands died of hunger, of disease epidemics. Those who could beg, borrow or steal a passage abroad, fled to Europe, to Asia. Out of what was estimated to be a population of a hundred and twenty millions in 1935, only seven millions were living in America when the ants turned north."

"And now?" asked the Professor.

"In the whole western hemisphere there are probably a few hundred thousand beast men bred by the Master Ants for food and transportation."

I stared at the Professor with horror. Only yesterday, it seemed, we had left a populous, thriving America. Great industrial cities had sent their smoke and ash into the sky; giant locomotives had carried thousands of people on two ribbons of steel over thousands of miles of country; and now... now ... it was all as if it had never been. Could it be possible that five hundred years had dissipated an empire? Five hundred years!

"Come," said Soltano; "enough of such matters for the nonce. You will learn more of us as the days pass, as you become better acquainted with us individually."

He led the way down into the plaza where we were immediately surrounded by the crowd and warmly greeted.

WHEN I stepped down from the rostrum on that first day in Science Castle, it was to meet the girl who had rescued the Professor and myself from the Master Ants. Her name was Theda. If anything, she looked move beautiful than she did the day before.

"You have gone through much danger, Raymond," she said shyly.

"It was worth it, if it brought me to you," I replied; and meant it.

She did not seem displeased.

"It is the hour for bathing. Let us go to the pool."

I looked around for the Professor; but he was walking away with a group of elderly Scientians, who were evidently bent on entertaining him. "Very well," I said.

The pool was an artificial pond perhaps fifty yards square. I plunged after her into the pool. When I drew myself, panting, out of the water at the other end of the pond, it was to find myself sprawling beside the handsome lad who had called me to breakfast. His name, I learned, was Servus, and he was Theda's twin brother. Their parents, he informed me, were both dead. Theda and he were enthralled with my accounts of the life and customs of 1926. By the time we were ready to dress far lunch, the three of us were firm friends.

In the days that followed, I learned a great deal about Science Castle and its inhabitants. With Theda and Servus I walked the parapets which circled the roof of the Castle and looked down the steep sides that fell a sheer eight hundred feet before they touched earth. From the foot of the Castle, the hill sloped away. To the east, as far as the eve could see, stretched a level waste; and to the northwest lay a range of somber hills. On the plain, twenty-five hundred feet below, grew nothing green. The sight reminded me of something about which I had wondered more than once.

"How do you get water ?" I asked Servus. "In the early days," he replied, "we relied on wells, boring as deep as four thousand feet; but two hundred years ago they began to fail us. There was a terrible time, I believe, when we were faced with a water famine. Efforts were made to bring water from distant lakes, but without success. Then just in time, our chemists discovered how to make water."

"Make water!" I exclaimed.

"Yes, from hydrogen and oxygen, you know. Now all the water we use is manufactured and stored in great tanks far down in the depths of the Castle, from whence it is raised by means of force pumps."

"Wonderful," I said, marveling at such ingenuity.

But wonderful things were what one learned to expect at Science Castle. For instance, the Professor and I were invited one day to be present at a history review to be given to the children of the Castle. The walls of the classrooms were made transparent by means of the ray and there was all the illusion of being outdoors. Highly perfected projecting devices showed moving pictures depicting the building of the Castle. It made me gasp with awe when I realized that the opening reels of this stupendous picture had been taken five

hundred and fifteen years before. One saw the motor caravan of scientists and workers coming to the hill and watched breathlessly as the earth was broken by great steam-shovels. One saw the vast walls of the Castle growing upward foot by foot, and finally the finished structure heing furnished and stored with all the myriad inventions and devices of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. In the same manner we were shown how the Castle was enlarged in 2075. Workers sheathed in protecting metal armor labored to raise walls When these walls were finished and floors installed, they were scoured with flaming rays which hardened the metal and destroyed whatever insect life might have gotten inside them. So inch by inch we watched the pictured story of how the Castle had grown to its present proportions.

"Some moving picture," I breathed to the Professor. "What a knockout that would be for Cecil B. DeMille! Did you notice the scene where the panic stricken people rushed by pursued by the ants ?" I shuddered. "And the one where the scientists and workers were hoisted up the walls into the Castle ? What I can't understand is why the ants couldn't have swarmed over the walls and wiped everyone of them out."

Soltano overheard me. "Because," he replied, "the walls were electrified. Nothing could have lived on them after the current was turned on."

About a week after this the Professor and I were taken into the body of the Castle proper. Far down under the fairy-like buildings and blooming gardens on its roof, were the machine-shops, the laboratories which made possible the pulsing life above. Here we saw great dynamos and whirring machines at whose functions I could not even guess. In one vast room men were putting the finishing touches to what were evidently a number of airships; in another, workers were manufacturing crude oils and thick greases. Whole floors were given over to experimental and research work of too complicated a nature for me to attempt to describe. The Professor was enthralled. He was in his element here and hated to go on.

"What do you do for metal ?" he asked suddenly. "Iron, tin, zinc?"

''Hemmed in as we are," replied Soltano, "sufficient metal has always been difficult to obtain. However, we have managed it. A great deal of our tanks, wheels, shafts, and so forth, are made from ptilp, from trees grown in the gardens above, and even from vegetable tops, leaves and vines which, treated by a chemical process we have discovered, serve our purpose very well. Iron is the one metal, however, for which we must mine. In those hills north-west of us are old mines which we still work when ore is needed. The work is hard and dangerous ; The men engaged at it must go clothed in protecting metal and be constantly protected with flaming rays. However, some day when ore is

needed, you may go with us in the airships and see the whole process for yourself."

He dismissed the subject hastily, evidently having something of further interest to show us.

"That," he said, pointing to great metal tanks and a mass of complicated pipes and whirring wheels, "is where the water is made."

He pressed a button. The walls surrounding us became transparent, and looking out we could see the brown slope of the hill. Suddenly I focussed my gaze. About twenty feet from where we stood was a small mound. Something behind it stirred. I caught a glimpse of a metallic body, of waving antennae. "Yes," said Soltano. "it is a Master Ant; they are all around us. But I did not bring you down to show you them; I am going to show you something far more deadly." He guided us into a large lift. "Under us. the foundations of the Castle sink into the ground for a hundred feet. It is where we manufacture the composite metal when needed." The Hit sank silently into blackness; the noise of clanging machinery above grew fainter, seemed farther away, almost ceased. We stepped forth into a wilderness of massive columns. Soltano pressed the now familiar button and the walls faded. We could see the black earth beyond them, and even, it seemed, a foot or two into it. Something gray out there was moving and turning along little runways and tunnels. Millions and millions of tiny things were ceaselessly burrowing and gnawing. For a moment I did not understand, then Soltano spoke and enlightenment came to me. There were the termites— the white ants.

"BEHOLD the enemies we fight," said Soltano solemnly. "The insects out there are far more dangerous to us than the Master Ants, whose creators they are. Those termites are seeking to demolish the very foundations on which the castle rests by eating away the earth from under them."

I felt the gooseflesh rise on my skin.

"Three times in the last one hundred years have we had to sink our foundations further into the earth. Originally, this basement was only fifty feet deep. Now it is a hundred. In a few years it will be more than that."

"But good God!" I cried; "can't you do something to stop them ?"

He shrugged his shoulders. "So far— no ! However, our chemists, our various scientists, are busy experimenting night and day. It is hoped that we may perfect a poison, a ray that will kill them off, prevent them from coming near the castle walls."

"And if you cannot?" asked the Professor.

"It we cannot," replied Soltano; "then some day..." He made a fatal gesture with his hand.

I thought of the busy, joyful life far above, of the green gardens and the laughing women and children. I thought of Thcda, and I suddenly realized how much she had grown to mean to me.

"Professor," I said that night when we had retired to our room, "with all those machines and tools at your command, couldn't you make another Time Machine?"

"I possibly could," replied the Professor.

"Then why don't you?"

"Perhaps I shall. Soltano has promised to put a laboratory at my disposal, you know."

Much relieved, I turned away. Here was a way out for Theda and myself. I fell asleep and dreamed I had taken her back on a time machine to 1926 and was showing her the University campus and pointing out the tune on the campanile clock. At breakfast Theda stood behind the counter and filled my tray with cereal, fruit, toast and eggs. That was one thing I had early noticed: there were no idlers tolerated in Science Castle. All worked at something useful. One week Servus, for instance, washed dishes three hours a day; the next he would be tending to the vegetable gardens; bringing in the fresh heads of cabbage and lettuce, gathering the firm, red carrots, or digging potatoes. At my own request, I was given such work. I was amazed at the fertility of those gardens, amazed that fruit trees would grow at all under such conditions.

"Is the soil renewed very often?" I asked Servus.

He shook his head. "It is never renewed."

"Then you must have good fertilizers?"

'We have— electricity."

"Electricity !" I exclaimed.

"Why, yes. Taken from the air by means of magnetism. But you shouldn't marvel at that so much. Didn't a German engineer do as much in your day? But whereas he got two crops from sandy soil, we get seven."

So it went. I had noticed no animals of any sort in Science Castle, not even cows, yet there was no lack or eggs, butter, milk or meat. Servus again explained the mystery. "Milk is made from turnips and potatoes." he explained. "I believed a man named Ford did that in 1926. Eggs and meat are manufactured synthetically." He went into technical details which there is no need to set down here.

Truly a wonderful place, this Science Castle. It was difficult to realize that its brilliant inhabitants were chained to a hill-top by insects which for centuries had been man's hopeless inferiors. But were they so chained! Hadn't Theda rescued the Professor and me by means of an aircraft? And hadn't Soltano shown us others in the process of being built? And hadn't we been invited to

take trips in them? One night while I sat with her on the parapet in the moonlight, I asked Theda about it. "Yes," she replied, "we have air vessels; but save for mining ore they do not do us much good."

"Why not?" I asked.

"Because outside of Science Castle there is hardly a spot they dare land."

"But there is Europe and Asia," I exclaimed. "Perhaps the ants do not control there."

"On the average of once in every ten years," she replied, "expeditions have left here for over the seas— and never returned. My father commanded the last aircraft to attempt the flight. That was five years ago," she added softly. I pressed her hand.

"But they seem to be wonderfully well-controlled machines," I said. "What drives them?"

"Radio power. Waves are sent from a controlling center in the Castle here and received by a device incorporated in the airships themselves. Complete control of the machine is invested in the driver by means of a lever which oprates a very simple mechanical arrangement. For a radius of several hundred miles, and in fair weather, the aircrafts are absolutely safe and easily handled. Many of tis use them for pleasure rides. But beyond that—" She shook her head. "Perhaps atmospheric conditions interfere with the waves when sent over too great a distance; perhaps the receiving apparatus fails to operate beyond a certain point, though theoretically they should pick up power waves four thousand miles from the sending station. All we know, however, is that those who venture too far— vanish. Perhaps they fall into the sea and are drowned. Or worse still, on the plains, and the Master Ants..." Her voice shivered to silence. For comfort against a black spectre which took on the hideous form of an insect, we drew together.

"Theda," I said unsteadily. "O Theda! Would you... will you..."

In answer she kissed me.

The Master Ants Take to the Air

UNDER the thin metal roof which is all that shuts away from us the hordes of conquering ants, I am seated, putting the finishing touches to this manuscript. Of the terrible catastrophe which has occurred. I can hardly write. We were standing one day by the parapet when a young Scientian who had gone on a pleasure spin, planed down from the sky and landed on the plaza. His face was ashen-grey.

"What is it?" demanded Soltano sharply.

"The ants!" gasped the breathless youth. "The ants have taken to the air!"

"To the air! What do you mean ?"

"That they have mounted the backs of insects, of wasps a yard long, and are flying!"

Instantly the Castle was in an uproar. From every direction the Scientians came rushing; from the depths of the Castle, from the gardens and the pool. They assembled irf the plaza and listened to the tale the youth had to tell. Attracted by strange activities among the mounds, he had flown nearer the ground than usual, when great insects had spread gossamer wings and pursued him. Fortunately, the speed of the airship had outdistanced them, though at first it had been a close chase! When he finished speaking, Soltano mounted the rostrum and addressed the gathering.

"Fellow Scientians," he said, "if what we have just heard be true, then Science Castle is in immediate and grave danger. You will remember that we have often discussed the possibility of an alliance between the Master Ants and other insects. Now it seems they have enslaved or enlisted a winged insect, probably of the bee family. Not only that, they have evidently fed them with special foods until monsters, capable of bearing a Master Ant aloft have been produced. Sooner or later we shall he attacked. The great cone must be manned at once; the chemical pumps made ready. Let everyone hasten to his post, for we are facing the gravest crisis in our history."

I stared at the Professor with fear. He stared back at me grimly.

"What do you think ?" I asked with dry lips.

"That the situation is desperate."

"But the ray cones, the acids!"

"My boy," he said solemnly, "if those insects have really taken to the air, then God help us !"

I sank nervelessly into a seat; then sprang up again as the remembrance of something sent a thrill of hope through my heart.

"The Time Machine!" I cried. "Surely you have finished it by this time!"

The Professor nodded. "Yes," he said, "it is ready."

"Then we can make our escape by means of it."

He looked at me pityingly. "I'm afraid not."

"What's the matter with it?"

"Nothing. Only you forget something."

"Forget what?"

"How we aged when we travelled in it before."

"Well!"

"Don't you see? It would have the same effect on us again."

For a moment I did not understand ; then the appalling truth staggered me like a bolt from the blue. The Professor read the dawning comprehension on my face.

"Yes," he said slowly, "yes. If age is caused by the action of environment, then the same friction would be encountered by the body whether it traveled forward in time or backward. In returning to 1926, we would be subjected to the same resistance, the same wear and tear, as we were in coming from it. That would mean annihilation for me, death. For yourself and Theda, would it be much better? You could expect to find yourself an old man of eighty or ninety, penniless, unknown, in charge of a middle- aged woman. What good would that do either you or Theda? Besides, there is something else to consider. Do you realize that it was only by a miracle we escaped death when our Time Machine fell to pieces on the plain out there? Yet there is no way—"

"Look!" cried a woman's shrill voice. "Look!"

Far out on the plain had risen what seemed an eddying cloud. Even as we gazed, petrified, there rose another, and yet another, until the sky was black with them. The Master Ants were coming to the attack!

Of the ghastly fight which look place on the roof, there is little to say. The millions of insects, with their winged steeds, simply fell upon the giant ray cone and smothered it to ineffectiveness with their charred bodies. Nearly two hundred of the Scientians fell in hattle, stung to death by the sword-like stings of the flying insects. The remainder fled panic-stricken from the roof into the interior of the Castle and sealed up the entrance with impregnable composite metal.

By means of the transparent ray it is possible to look through the walls and ceiling. The once fair garden is being eaten and destroyed. The fruit trees are crumbling into dust. All that is vulnerable is a decaying wreck. As I look at the scene of unutterable desolation, despair grips my heart, and a wild desire to strap myself into the Time Machine and quit this terrible future for the past. But that is impossible. There is nothing to do but stay and face whatever the future holds in store for us. Soltana maintains that our situation is not yet hopeless. Those Scientians amaze me. Their courage and optimism in the face of disaster are wonderful. Now I know what their religion is: It is an abiding faith in the power of their science to aid and uphold them.

The Professor tells me of an intricate arrangement for supplying us with air; I do not understand it yet very well, but it is made clear to me that we can live in the interior of the Castle indefinitely. Water and synthetic foods can be made. Meantime, in the splendidly equipped laboratories and machine shops, the scientsts and inventors are rushing forward experiments which may release, they say, the energy in the atom and give us possession of weapons

which will destroy the ants and return the lordship of America to man. But as to this, I do not know; I hardly dare hope. Theda leans over me and presses her soft cheek against mine, and though I do not feel at all heroic, I am comforted and made stronger by her love.

Escape or help seems impossible. Nevertheless, I am going to tie this manuscript in the Time Machine, which stands ready at my side, and send it back to the period I have left forever. I repeat my hope that it will fall into the hands of intelligent people and that its contents will be made known to the public. It may he that we shall overcome the ants in the inevitable final conflict between men and insects. In that case we will try to communicate with the twentieth century again. If not, then we bid a final farewell to the people of 1926.

Signed:
Professor John Reubens,
Raymond Bent.

What Is To Be Done with the Document?

THE nationally known lawyer laid down the incredible document. For a moment there was complete silence in the room. Finally the President of the University spoke.

"I suppose you wish our advice as to what disposition to make of this... this...."

"Exactly," returned the lawyer. "I am positive it is a hoax; and yet...."

"And yet," finished the Doctor of Science, " 'there are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy!' as Hamlet said!"

The ordinary M. D. coughed. "There is something fishy ahout this whole affair." he said, "casting no reflections on our host, whose account of how the manuscript came into his possession I believe absolutely. Perhaps someone is trying to cover up the fact that twenty thousand dollars disappeared. But that doesn't sound plausible either. My advice is to lock the manuscript up in a safe. Time enough to publish its contents to the world if any queer happenings should occur— in South America, for instance."

The five other men gave hearty approval to this plan, and there the matter rests, except that there are at least three men in Berkeley, California, who carefully scan the press every day for any strange news from Latin America.

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3: The Blue Dimension

Amazing Stories, June, 1928

I AM suspected of having made away with Doctor Crewe. Furthermore, my sanity is being questioned. That is all right; I can blame no one for holding to either or both suspicions. But, as a matter of fact, I have not murdered my friend, nor am I insane. Listen to me patiently please, and I will do my best to tell you of the wonderful discovery of Doctor Crewe, and in what manner he came to disappear.

As you all know, Doctor Crewe was sixty years of age, and a retired optometrist. He lived alone in this house with one servant and friend, myself. I am a man of thirty, young, strong. In a great many ways the Doctor treated me as a son. He paid me a liberal wage and made it possible for me to go to college. Sensible of the kindness he has shown me, I have hated to quit his service, even though graduated from the university for over a year and a half.

Doctor Crewe was a shy, retiring man with no friend, save myself, and few acquaintances. Engrossed in experiments of his own, he would often enter his private workshop and not emerge from it, sometimes for as much as twenty-four hours on a stretch. Except in a general way, he never discussed his experiments with me, for he was not a man given to much talk. I had not the least inkling of what it was that engaged his time and interest until two weeks ago. At that time he became very excited. God forgive me, I thought the excessive hours of work, coupled with little sleep, was affecting him mentally.

"Robert," he said, calling me into his workshop. I went in. He was seated in a big chair right under the skylight. "Have you ever read this?" he asked, holding up a large copy of the "Book of Mormon."

"No, sir. At least not all of it," I answered. "But enough to know the story of how Joseph Smith dug up the tablets and was enabled to read and copy them?"

"You mean about the miraculous spectacles?" I laughed. "That bunk!"

"How do you know it's bunk?"

"Why, of course it is," I protested. "Who ever heard of such glasses before or since?"

"Nobody," he admitted. "And, as you say, Joseph Smith's story is probably bunk. But for all that, have you ever thought it might be possible to make a pair of glasses through which one could see—beyond this environment?"

"What do you mean?"

"Well, you know we are living an existence that is an enigma to the wisest of our scientists and philosophers. I believe it was Millikan, the physicist, who once, on being peremptorily requested to define what he meant by the term 'spirit,' retorted that he would gladly do so if his questioner would first define what matter was. As a matter of fact, matter is something beyond our comprehension. It is, of course, reducible to force. But what is force? You see, we can reason ourselves to an impasse."

"Granted. But what has that to do with spectacles?"

"More than you think. Consider that we are living at a certain rate of vibration. Everything vibrating within range of our own rate would manifest itself to us as matter, that is, as concrete material, such as mountains, trees, cats, birds, snakes, etc. Anything below or above our range would to us be merely space, nonexistent. You follow me?"

"Not quite," I confessed.

"Well, let me put it differently. You know there are sounds so high in frequency or pitch that the human ear cannot hear them, and vice versa, so low as to be inaudible."

"I understand that."

"Good. Then please remember that everything we observe around us, the smoke of factories, the red of sunset, houses, trees, animals, men, are all things manifesting themselves to us at varying degrees of vibration. At a certain rate they impinge on the ear as sound, the eye as color, the tongue as taste, the flesh as feeling. If that be true, then there must be a wealth of things all around us we cannot taste, handle or see."

I had never thought of this before.

"You mean," I said haltingly, "that as there are colors and sounds which go above or below our vision and hearing, so also there may be trees, animals—even men?"

"Why not? What is space to us may be reality to them, and what is reality to them may be space to us. I literally believe that, as, the Good Book says, there are worlds within worlds."

The conception was stupendous; I stared at him fascinated.

"Robert," said the Doctor impressively, "the world, as we know it, the world of our five senses, has been pretty well explored. Lots of people think there remains nothing more to discover. But what if someone were to open the way into those hidden realms all around us, the countless planes above and below! Think of the strange races that might be found, the new lands that might be visited, the wealth of knowledge that might be garnered!"

I thought of it and my head swam. Then I got a grasp on my common sense. All this was wonderful, of course; it made fine conversation; but, after all, it was speculation pure and simple.

"You know, sir," I said smilingly, "you made me believe for a moment that such worlds existed and could be visited."

"I am glad of that," he replied quietly, "because they do exist, and one of them at least can be visited."

This, I thought anxiously, is the result of overwork.

"Won't you come to lunch, Doctor? You know you've had nothing to eat since an early breakfast."

"Now, now, my boy," he laughed. "I assure you I'm quite sane and not at all light-headed. I repeat that such worlds actually exist, and that I am the Christopher Columbus who has discovered one of them."

I must have looked my incredulity, because he said with some force, "I see you doubt my contention. There is nothing for it, then, but to let you see it as I have seen it."

He picked up from a workbench what appeared to be a pair of goggles. They were attached to a cap piece made to fit over the head. The lenses were of queer design.

"In fact," said the Doctor, "they are ground with forty-five inner facets specifically arranged so as to redistribute the light waves before they impinge on the retina of the eye. Nor is that all of it. There are really two lenses arranged for each eye place, and in the space between them—about half an inch in thickness—is a space or cell filled with Radium Tetra Dimenol, a new substance. But I cannot tell you more, as I have discarded all the known formulae of optics in making these glasses."

He fitted the cap over my head, but as yet held the goggles above my eyes.

"I beg you not to be in the least alarmed, no matter what you see. Remember to keep quiet and not to endanger these lenses by any sudden move. Bear in mind the fact that you are in no bodily danger, that I am constantly by your side in this workshop, and tell me, if you can, what you see."

With that the eyeglasses were brought down until the rest piece fitted the nose, and the side flaps drawn back, were made fast in the rear. For a moment I was dazzled. My blinking eyes were lost in a maze of contrasting crystals. Then, so suddenly as to galvanize me with the shock, the crystals merged into one harmonious whole, seemed to expand, clarify, and I was gazing— gazing through the incredible aisles of a blue forest. It was a blue world that I saw. The trees, the giant ferns, the suckerlike blooms, were all blue. Not one prevailing shade of blue, no. The flowers, in some cases, were almost purplish

red, and in others, shaded away into the most delicious contrasts of creamy whites and yellows. But the predominating color was blue. What could be seen of the sky was greenish blue. The very atmosphere had a bluish tinge, as if the winds were colored and could be seen. Whichever way I looked, the blue forest was before me. I turned my head. It was on either side of me—behind me. A shiver of fear ran down my back.

"Doctor!" I cried nervously.

The pressure of his hand reassured me. "I am right here, my boy. Tell me, what do you see?"

"A blue forest," I said; "great ferns, and other growth of the same color."

"That is what I saw," he replied. "It isn't a tangled growth, though; it is more like a natural park, isn't it?"

"Yes," I answered, "it is more like a park. Wait! There's something stirring in the bushes to the left of me. I can't make it out as yet. I... Good God!" I gave a convulsive leap. If the Doctor had not held down my hands, I should have torn the glasses from my head.

"What is it?" he cried; but I couldn't answer. The strength left my body. Frozen with terror, I glared at the awful nightmare which seemed to pause and stare right into my face. Even in that moment of stark horror I realized that it was human— or what would have been called by whatever term passed for human in that other world.

It was, perhaps, seven feet in height, naked, and of an indigo color over all. The eyes were set at the end of short tentacles which continually moved and writhed and could bring the creature's vision to bear in any direction, or in several directions at the same time, for of organs of sight there were three. The mouth was a pouting thing that filled me with indescribable loathing, while the root like legs ended in flat feet probably a yard in circumference. Four snaky branches were attached to the upper part of the body and were evidently arms. What made me conclude that this creature occupied the place of man in its own world, was the fact that it carried a weapon. This was a length of stick shaped like a short spear.

That it was a weapon, and a deadly one, I soon had proof. Some monstrous sort of beetle came sailing through the trees. It was perhaps, a foot and a half long. The creature crouched, drew back what I must call one of its arms, and went through the motions of hurling the spear. The weapon never left its grasp, yet the insect fell as if struck by a bolt of lightning. The creature reached out with another of its snaky, branchlike arms. It seemed to have the ability of stretching it to an unbelievable extent. As the arm went, the tip of it became swollen, bell shaped, finally falling over the stricken insect like an inverted cup.

With a whiplike motion the prey was retrieved to the pouting mouth and swallowed—or rather absorbed— with an insuction of the lips.

It was too much. The sensation of being alone in a weird wood, confronted by such a monster as this, made me shudder. When one of the writhing tentacles brought a saucerlike eye within an inch of my nose, I screamed and clawed at my head.

"For God's sake, Doctor," I screamed, "take them off!"

The glasses were removed. I stared at the familiar walls of the workshop with heartfelt relief. The blue forest, the hideous creature, were as if they had never been.

I rubbed my eyes and laughed sheepishly.

"I'll admit, sir, that the thing scared me."

"What thing?" "The indigo monster."

He shook his head. "I've never seen it."

I walked over to the faucet and drank a glass of water. "Tell me, sir, isn't this some sort of trick you're playing on me?"

"In what way?"

"Oh, by arranging those lenses so as to create an optical illusion."

"No, my boy, no. What you saw is actual enough—only on another plane."

I couldn't believe it. That the blue forest, the incredible creature and the beetle it had swallowed, were all around me at that very moment, only manifesting themselves at a different rate of vibration, was unbelievable. It was too creepy an idea for me to accept without a severe mental struggle. What if something were to happen to the various rates of vibration, some accident merge them all into one!

I wiped the sweat from my brow.

"Don't you think it possible, Doctor, that you may have accidentally brought about an optical illusion? That what I saw has no reality, save as the products of the glasses themselves, ground and arranged a certain way?"

"I thought of that," he replied, "and that is one reason I called you in to look through them. The question was this: Would you only see what I saw? Personally, I saw only the blue forest, the flowers. But you saw something else besides. That would tend to prove that the spectacles are not deluding us, that we are really gazing into another dimension. However, let me assume the glasses and see if I can observe what you did."

I helped him to adjust the spectacles.

After a few moments he said, "There is not one such creature as you describe, but a dozen. Some are smaller than the others, and these I take to be females. In addition to spears, most of them carry yellow sacks. Undoubtedly the creatures belong to the dominant species in this strange world, though one

would hesitate before ranking them higher than the savages in ours. In some ways they remind me of trees. I shouldn't be surprised to learn that they had evolved directly from the vegetable kingdom. Their legs are really roots with leaflike protuberances. Now they are going away. They have disappeared to the right of me. The immediate forest is empty."

He was silent for a moment; but evidently saw nothing new, for in a few minutes he removed the spectacles.

"Robert," he said impressively, "you are the only one I have taken into my confidence. For ten years I have dreamed and experimented, keeping my own counsel. Until I am ready to announce my discovery to the world, I wish no word said of this."

"You can rely on my discretion, sir."

"Thank you, my boy, I knew you would say that. But from now on I shall need someone's assistance. Will you help me?"

"Gladly," I replied, because the thought of that other world, the untold marvels that might be laid bare to mankind by the Doctor's invention, fired my imagination.

The Doctor grasped my hand. "I'll admit I had counted on you. Know then, that in conjunction with the glasses, I believe I have perfected a machine by means of which it is possible to enter that other plane."

I could hardly believe my ears.

"You mean," I gasped, "that you have invented a way of getting there?"

"Exactly."

"But how?"

"Briefly, by altering the present rate of vibration and bringing it in harmony with that prevailing in the other dimension. Obviously, if my body can be made to vibrate in accord with the blue world, I shall manifest there and not here. At least, I think so."

He led the way to what looked not unlike a big wringing machine of the roller type. The rollers, however, were of fine wire coils, interlockingly arranged, and there were twelve of them supported above a large tub filled with a metallic fluid. Several powerful looking electric batteries lay at the tub's base, on the floor.

"This," said the Doctor, laying his hand affectionately on the complicated apparatus, "is the Revibrator. The person or thing to be revibrated is run through those rollers, at the same time an alternating current of electricity is maintained in the wire coils which affects the molecules of matter and brings about the vibratory change. Just how this is done, I cannot tell you, for I do not know; but take my word for it, it is done."

I stared at the inert piece of machinery with mixed emotions. That anyone or anything could be run through its rollers to another dimension seemed the height of absurdity. Yet, after my experience with the glasses, I was distrustful of my own doubt.

"I have here some white mice," said the Doctor. "If you will put on the spectacles again, Robert, I shall run them through the rollers and you can see what happens."

With trembling hands I affixed the cap, the goggles. The same blue forest grew before me, but now I saw it from a slightly different position. In spite of myself I could not repress a little shiver. This preliminary shiver was always to be mine whenever I gazed through the glasses. To all intents and purposes I was transferred from the workshop and set down in a blue wilderness. To reassure myself, I gripped the sides of my chair and ran my hands over them from time to time. In my ears sounded the purr of grinding cogs.

"Watch very carefully, Robert," came the quiet voice of the Doctor, "I am sending the first mouse through."

Nothing happened. I strained my eyes in the direction from whence his voice had come.

"I see nothing yet," I began, then gave a convulsive start, for in the blue air, to one side of me, appeared the head of a mouse.

I stared at it tensely. The shoulders followed the head, the forepaws the shoulders; then, by degrees, the rest of the body. No sooner was the body altogether in one piece than it fell a distance of several feet to the ground. And what a white mouse!

It was now as large as an ordinary rat. For a moment it cowered on the purplish grass, its pink eyes darting from side to side; then, apparently recovering from its first surprise at finding itself in such queer surroundings, it ran nimbly up a tree trunk and was lost to view behind a mass of foliage.

Two more mice came through and acted in a similar manner.

"But what made them so much larger?" I asked the Doctor, after removing the glasses.

He looked at me thoughtfully.

"I cannot say for certain, unless the pressure of the atmosphere is much less on the other plane than it is here. But whatever the reason, it doesn't seem to have impaired the activity of the mice. Also they went through the rollers in good physical condition. If mice, why not men?"

Indeed, why not? It appeared perfectly feasible. Yet at the thought of entering that other world physically as well as visually, my flesh crept.

AFTER lunch, about three-thirty, the Doctor called me into the workshop again.

"So far," he said, "we have only looked into that other dimension from one spot, this room. How would it appear from some other place—say Lake Merritt Park?"

"I have no idea."

"Well, let's go and see." Seated on a secluded bench, the Doctor opened his satchel and produced the glasses.

"Put them on, Robert," he commanded. Nothing loath, I obeyed. The same startling metamorphosis took place in my surroundings; but this time I was on the edge of the blue forest and before me stretched a rolling plain. It was covered with a profusion of daisylike flowers and low-growing shrubs. A herd of purplish-black beasts with six legs and tortoise-like heads were grazing in the near foreground. They were about the size of sheep.

Though now more or less accustomed to the sensation of being transported, as it were, into this mysterious other plane, I could not refrain from instinctively crying out when the herd of beasts suddenly stampeded in my direction. It was hard to realize that I had no existence for them; that I was so much space through which they sped like a whirlwind and were gone.

Not all of them, though. A half dozen of the six-legged beasts were left behind, stark and lifeless.

From the low-growing shrubbery through which they had evidently crept in a recumbent position, burst a band of the oddest huntsmen mortal eyes ever beheld. I call them huntsmen, because, though much shorter than, and in some respects different from, the indigo monsters seen in the forest, they, too, belonged to the same dominant species. In color they were not unlike yellow copper, and in height they could not have exceeded five feet. If they had been the first "human" beings to meet my sight in this weird world, I should doubtless have considered them horrible enough; but compared to the hideous giants of their kind, they were almost beautiful to observe.

Formed much as were the giants, there was this difference in structure. The eyes— of which they possessed but two— were set on the ends of stable protuberances, and not of writhing tentacles. A feathery, fernlike hair grew plume fashion from the head and waved in the wind. The mouth was more pleasing than the pouting mouth of the indigo monsters, the lips flowerlike, but the arms and legs were of the same general nature, though on a more delicate scale.

I relinquished the glasses to the Doctor, who wished to observe them for himself.

"Yes," he remarked, "these creatures are undoubtedly of the same species as the ones seen in the forest, but palpably of a dwarfish branch. I am inclined to think them higher in the social scheme than the others. They are armed with the same sort of spears, but in addition carry knives or swords with which they are dismembering the game."

He rose abruptly to his feet.

"Robert," he said, "they are getting ready to move on. By means of the glasses I am going to try and trail them to their homes. I want you to lead me by the arm and see that I don't stumble into people and buildings or get run over. Keep track of the streets and the general direction, because later on I shall try and draw a map of the course I've followed!"

Then ensued one of the queerest walks I've ever taken. Oddly enough, the course followed by the creatures in that other world seemed to follow the streets laid out in this.

There were times, of course, when the Doctor complained I was leading him away from their trail, but nearly always some street swung us once more in the desired direction, or they turned back into ours. For three-quarters of an hour we walked. Suddenly, in the vicinity of Fruitvale Avenue, the Doctor halted.

"Marvelous," he murmured. "Wonderful. I expected nothing like this."

"What is it?" I asked, all on fire with curiosity. But for nearly ten minutes he made no answer; he was absorbed in the contemplation of something he saw. At last I could contain myself no longer. I shook him by the shoulder. "May I have a look, sir?"

"Yes, Robert, yes," he said, coming out of his spell with a start. "Of course you may, my boy."

I assumed the cap and goggles with trembling fingers. What new marvel could I expect to see? What further monstrosity?

The glasses came over my eyes, the flaps were buttoned. I strained my vision to the utmost. The familiar blue grew in front of me. But what was this! No forest, no rolling plain, but a city. A great square of sapphire blue was all around me. Underfoot lay a flagged pavement of the same color, dotted here and there by showering fountains, strange trees, exotic blooms. This square was bordered with magnificent buildings. Like spokes radiating from a central hub, wide avenues ran away from the square.

I looked about me with awe. Who owned this city? Surely not the indigo giants or the copper-colored dwarfs. This magnificent place seemed far beyond the capabilities of either to build. Here, undoubtedly, dwelt the real rulers of this other dimension, the superior race of all, but where were they? Save for some gigantic butterflies, some creeping reptiles not unlike lizards, the place

was deserted. Everything was in perfect order, no sign of ruin or decay, yet not a glimpse of inhabitants could I gain.

"The housetops, Robert," came the voice of the Doctor. "Look at the housetops."

Even as he spoke, I saw them. Were they living beings or statues wrought from navy-blue stone? There they were, like carven images, on the cornice of every building. Their basilisk eyes were set in a fixed stare, and on one outflung limb some terrible insect poised, with wings spread, as if ready for flight. It was ghastly. I felt the gooseflesh rising on my skin.

And there was another uncanny thing. Try as we might, neither the Doctor nor myself could gain access to one of those buildings. Always, no matter how we moved, we were in the open, and the edifices of sapphire stone were so many sealed crypts.

"But that is natural enough," I exclaimed, after some thought. "If from another plane, people were to gaze at our world, they would not be able to look through wood or stone into our houses."

"True enough," replied the Doctor, "but you forget that, while, by means of the glasses, we are viewing the wonderful city, our bodies are capable of moving through the space its buildings occupy. Theoretically nothing should prevent us from pausing on the spot in this plane occupied by one of those buildings on the other plane and viewing its interior."

All the time we sat on the kerbing, talking and alternately gazing through the glasses, people in our own plane were passing to and fro and looking at us curiously. I wondered what they would say if I should grasp them by the arms and tell them that the space they walked through so carelessly was occupied by immense buildings of a strange design; that all around them were nightmarish monsters with three eyes and suckerlike hands; and that they were only separated from another world and all its untold terrors by a variation in the rate of vibration. They would call me crazy, of course. But what if they should catch a glimpse of an indigo giant through the spectacles? What then?

I pondered over that thought as we walked homewards.

That night, the Doctor drew a map of the other world—or rather, of as much of it as he had seen or could visualize.

"The forest is here," he said. "To the east are the rolling plains; and southeast of us lies the Silent City."

He studied what he had drawn intently. "That's funny," he remarked.

"What is?" I asked. "The size of that city. It occupies only a section of East Oakland, and yet it impressed me as being immensely large."

He shook his head. "The whole thing is an enigma, but one that shall not baffle me much longer."

Suddenly I thought of something. "Those huntsmen you followed," I exclaimed, "what became of them?"

"I don't know," confessed the Doctor. "When I saw the buildings to one side of me, I ceased following the huntsmen and directed my footsteps toward the city."

AFTER he finished with his map, we spent several hours gazing through the glasses. It was night, too, on that other plane. In the blue forest dense darkness brooded. Nothing was to be seen but spectral lights flitting through the trees. Several times vague shapes blundered by; and once a bat-like something soared right into the space that was my face.

So vivid was the scene on that other plane, so real the feeling of being surrounded by black night and at the mercy of unearthly creatures, that I was forced, from time to time, to remove the glasses and assure myself that I was not really there.

It was after midnight when I retired to bed, and left the Doctor still gazing through the spectacles.

In the morning, however, he was afoot early, and appeared fresh and rested, more so than I.

"Well, Robert," he said cheerfully at breakfast, "this is the big day."

"We are going to take the spectacles out again?" I asked eagerly.

"Better than that, my boy; I am going through the machine."

I tried to dissuade him from his rash project until he had viewed the other plane more thoroughly with the glasses, but he was adamant. "The mice met with no harm and neither shall I."

"From the machine, no," I replied, "but what has their fate been from other beasts? Perhaps by this time they have been devoured. Think of the indigo giants. What would you do if you fell in with several of them? And there are doubtless more fearful creatures of which we know nothing."

"True, Robert, true; but I shall take implements with me. A German luger with plenty of cartridges; a compass. You might as well cease talking, my boy, my mind is made up."

Still I did not desist. "Let me go, sir," I pleaded, even though my flesh crawled at the very thought. "I am younger than you, stronger."

"No," he said, "no. This is my adventure. I have been looking forward to it for a long time and do not mean to step aside for another."

"Then take me with you!" I cried. "In that unknown world two will be much safer than one."

But this request he also denied.

"You must stay on this side and be ready to operate the machine when I return."

There was nothing for it, then, but to repair with him to the workshop and listen to his last instructions.

"I am going to make for the Silent City on my first expedition," he said. "I expect to be gone only a few hours. Under no circumstances must you leave this machine in my absence."

He laid his hand on the Revibrator.

"Watch for me with the glasses, and when I give you the sign, press this button here. It reverses the action of the Revibrator and will restore me to this room. Do you understand me?"

I made him repeat his instructions.

"There, I'm sure you've got it, my boy. And now look through the spectacles and see if the road is clear."

With a heart full of misgivings I did as he bade. Nothing was stirring in the blue forest. Only the ferns waving gently, and the leaves of the tall trees.

"To make sure that the machine is functioning properly, I am sending the luger and a box of cartridges through by themselves," said the Doctor.

Almost with his words the luger and cartridges materialized on that other plane. But now the luger was the size of a large rifle and the ammunition box as big as a shoebox. I remembered the mice, and a foreboding of trouble came over me.

"Doctor," I began, but never finished the warning, because the Doctor was coming through.

I saw his head. It was an enormous thing. I looked at it with horror. Behind it came the massive neck, the mighty shoulders. Inch by inch, seemingly out of nothing, the unbelievable body emerged, fell to the purple grass.

"Good God!" I exclaimed; for when the Doctor rose to his feet he was all of twenty feet tall. He stood up, a great colossus of a man, and stretched his arms experimentally, stamping with his feet, and taking several deep breaths. He smiled reassuringly at me and waved his hand in my direction, though of course I was invisible to him. I watched him with bated breath, as he picked up the luger and retrieved the box of cartridges.

Quite calmly he consulted his compass and map, got his bearings, and after a last glance in my direction swung off through the trees and ferns. His gigantic figure was visible for some distance, the head appearing above the treetops. Finally it disappeared and I was left to my lonely vigil— surely the strangest vigil ever kept by mortal man.

LUNCH time came and passed. The evening shadows deepened. Darkness fell over the blue forest in that other world— the creepy forest through which I had seen the Doctor walk and disappear— and still he did not come. A prey to the most ghastly of fears, I sat all night by the Revibrator, peering through the glasses at the spectral lights that wandered among the trees, shuddering at the bat-like forms which swept silently on and over me.

And all the time I asked myself how it went with the Doctor, overtaken by night on that other plane. Had he succeeded in reaching the Silent City? Was he encamped there now or had some hideous beast destroyed him or some strange power taken him prisoner? I thought of those brooding images on the housetops and the blood ran cold in my veins.

I had one consolation. Save for the navy-blue statues in the Silent City, on that other plane, no creature as large as the Doctor now was, had been seen by me. Even the indigo giants were dwarfed by the colossus he had become. And he was armed with an immense luger— a deadly weapon. Yet for all that, anxiety consumed me.

Morning dawned. Haggard and worn, drinking cup after cup of black coffee, I watched through the leaden hours of the second day. The blue forest was strangely still. Or was it my imagination? Nothing stirred in its depths. No life, no motion. I might have been staring through a stereoscope at blended pictures. The Doctor had said he would be only a few hours, yet the second night came and he was still missing.

With the descent of darkness the blue forest became alive. It moved and murmured. Though I could not hear it murmur, I sensed it. Perhaps the blood was pounding at my heart. I cursed myself for ever having allowed the Doctor to embark on his rash journey. I should have restrained him— by force, if that had been necessary.

The third day dawned. I watched it breaking in that other, that incredible world, that blue dimension separated from our own merely by a slight difference in rates of vibration.

"If he does not come this morning," I said to myself, "I shall take the glasses on the streets and go searching for him."

But about eight o'clock I saw him. I shouted aloud in pure joy, oblivious to the fact that he could not hear my voice. He came striding through the forest, ten yards at a stride, and most amazing sight of all, a dozen indigo giants came with him.

The Doctor's clothes seemed much the worse for wear, torn and rent, but he himself appeared sound in body and limb. I was beside myself with excitement. What strange sights had he seen, what adventures had he had?

The indigo giants were evidently his friends. He had been to the Silent City. In a few minutes now, he would be back in the workshop with me, telling me of the marvels of that other plane, the secret of the navy-blue statues. I could not restrain another exultant shout.

Arrived at the spot where he had made his landing three days before, the Doctor looked about him hesitatingly. I could read what he was thinking. Was this the correct spot? To reassure him I ran a pencil— the first thing my fingers picked up— through the Revibrator. It dropped at his feet the size of a walking stick.

At this sight the indigo monsters recoiled with every indication of wonder and fear. Instantly the Doctor smiled. He waved his hand. His mouth formed the words, "Reverse the Revibrator."

I pressed the button he had instructed me to. Nothing happened.

The Doctor pawed at the air with his hands, a perplexed look beginning to dawn on his face. For perhaps five minutes I waited; then I scribbled a note on a piece of paper and sent it through to him.

"What is the matter?"

He picked up the paper, now the size of a napkin, and wrote on the reverse side, "I cannot come back, because on this plane the machine has no existence."

"Good God!" I whispered, appalled. Then the following dialogue took place between us by means of written messages.

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"That I have overlooked a vital thing."

"In what way?"

"By forgetting that the Revibrator can manifest other things over here, but palpably not itself."

Through the glasses I glared at him in horror.

"But what are you going to do?"

"I don't know. I'm trying to think. In the meantime, Robert, can't you send me through some food—a pot of coffee? I'm starved."

"Yes," I answered back, "yes."

To get the food and coffee I had to remove the goggles. How it happened I don't know. Perhaps my nerves were unstrung from the long hours of wakefulness, the terrible suspense of three days, the crowning disaster of all. Be that as it may the cap, the goggles slipped from my fumbling fingers and fell— straight into the tub of metallic fluid under the rollers.

Half frantic with terror I dipped them out and dried them off. No, they didn't seem hurt, they weren't broken; but when I tried to look through the lenses I could see nothing but blackness. That was ten days ago. And every one

of those days I've been in this room sending food and supplies through the Revibrator, and trying to fix the glasses.

That is all.

You ask me where the Doctor is? I tell you he is somewhere in space, on that other plane, trying to get back—and he can't!

———————————

4: The Dancer in the Crystal

Weird Tales Dec 1929

THEY WHO LIVED during that terrible time will never forget it— twenty-five years ago, when the lights went out.

It was in 1956.

All over the world, in the same hour, and practically at the same minute, electrical machinery ceased to function.

The youth of today can hardly realize what a terrible disaster that was for the people of the middle Twentieth Century. England and America, as well as the major nations of Europe, had just finished electrifying their railroads and scrapping the ponderous steam engines which did duty on some lines up until as late as the summer of 1954. A practical method of harnessing the tides and using their energy to develop electricity, coupled with the building of dams and the generating of cheap power through the labor of rushing rivers and giant waterfalls, and the invention of a device for broadcasting it by wireless as cheaply as it was generated, had hastened this electrification. The perfection of a new vacuum tube by the General Electric Company at Schenectady, in the United States, had made gas economically undesirable. The new method, by which it was possible to relay heat for all purposes at one-third the cost of illuminating gas, swept the various gas companies into oblivion. Even the steamers which plied the seven seas, and the giant planes that soared the air, received the power that turned their propellers, warmed their cabins and cooked their foods, in much the same fashion as did the factories, the railroads, and the private homes and the hotels ashore. Therefore when electricity ceased to drive the machines, the world stopped. Telegraph, telephone, and wireless communication ceased. Country was cut off from country, city from city, and neighborhood from neighborhood. Automobiles broke down; streetcars and electric trains refused to run; powerhouses were put out of commission; and at night, save for the flickering light of what lanterns, candles, and oil lamps could be resurrected, cities, towns, and hamlets were smothered in darkness.

I have before me the records of that time. It was ten and eleven o'clock in London, Paris, Berlin, and other continental cities when it happened. Restaurants, theaters, hospitals and private homes were plunged into darkness. Mighty thoroughfares that a moment before had glittered and glowed with thousands of lights and wheeling signs became gloomy canyons where people at first paused, questioned, and later plunged through in

terrified clamor. Various men who later wrote their impressions for newspapers and magazines say that the thing which shook their nerves the most was the sudden silence which prevailed when all traffic ceased— that, and five minutes later the maddened cries and groans and curses of men and women fighting like wild beasts to escape from crowded restaurants and theaters.

People coursed through the streets shouting to one another that the power-houses had been blown up, that an earthquake had shaken them down. The most absurd statements were made, tossed from mouth to mouth, and added to the general bewilderment and panic. On the street corners religious fanatics suddenly sprang up, proclaiming that the end of the world had come, and that the sinners had better repent of their sins before it was too late. In the hospitals, nurses and doctors found themselves working under a frightful handicap. Gruesome tales are told of doctors caught in the midst of emergency operations. Because of the darkness it was impossible properly to attend the sick. Whenever available, candles, oil lamps and lanterns were pressed into service; but there were pitifully few of these to be had, and nowhere to turn for more. Telephone wires were dead, and automobiles, cars and buses stalled. To add to the horror, fire broke out in various places. There was no way of ringing in an alarm about them, and the fire apparatus could not have responded if there had been. So the fires spread. And the people of those neighborhoods where the flames leapt to heaven, at last had light— the light of their burning homes.

And then in the midst of all this horror and tumult the denizens of the dark, festering spots of the city crept forth. They swarmed from the filthy alleys and from the dives of the professional criminal, furtive-eyed, predatory; and houses were robbed, men killed, and women assaulted. The police were powerless to act; their mobility was gone; burglar alarms did not warn; and the city lay like a giant Samson shorn of its strength.

So that night passed, not for one city alone, but for hundreds of cities!

ii

WHILE all this was happening in the old world, chaos gripped the new.

Across the Atlantic, in the eastern cities of the United States and Canada, and as far west as Montreal and Chicago, the wheels stopped going at that hour when the workers began to pour forth from the factories and shops, and when the late shopping crowds were thronging the trains and the subways. On the surface cars and on the streets there was, of course, no immediate alarm. Moving-picture and vaudeville houses opened wide their doors, raised the

blinds on their windows, and evacuated their patrons in good order. But underground in the various tubes and subways it was a different matter. Hundreds of cars bearing thousands of passengers were stalled in stifling blackness. Guards labored heroically to still the rising hysteria and panic. For perhaps fifteen or twenty minutes— in some cases as long as half an hour— they managed to maintain a species of order. But the great pumps and fans that usually circulated fresh air through the tunnels were no longer functioning. When the foul air fogged the lungs, the passengers went mad. Sobbing and cursing and praying, they fought to escape from the cars, as at the same moment the people of Berlin, Paris and London were fighting to escape from restaurants and theaters. They smashed the windows of the coaches, and in wriggling through them impaled the flesh of their bodies, their hands and faces, on jagged slivers of glass. They trampled each other under foot and flowed in terrified mobs along the right of way, searching madly for exits. In New York alone ten thousand of them perished. They bled to death, were crushed, or died of heart-failure and suffocation.

Above ground, the streets and avenues were thronged with millions of human beings trying to get home on foot. For hours dense crowds of workers, shoppers and businessmen filled the highways and byways. Here again panic was caused by the crashing planes. In Montreal the Royal Dominion air liner, Edward VII, on route on a non-stop flight from Halifax to Vancouver with four hundred passengers, fell from a height of three thousand feet onto Windsor Station, killing her own passengers and crew, and blotting out the lives of hundreds of people who were in the station at the time. In New York, Boston and Chicago, where the then new magnetic runabouts were making their initial appearance, hundreds of airplanes plunged to the ground, killing and maiming not only their passengers, but the men, women and children on whom they fell. "It was," states an eye-witness in a book he later wrote, called The Great Debacle, "a sight fit to appal the stoutest heart. Subway exits were disgorging ghastly mobs of clawing people; a crashing plane had turned a nearby street into a shambles; crowds ran this way and that, shrieking, praying. Everywhere was panic."

Panic indeed! Yet the records show that what they could do, the police and fire departments did. Mounted policemen were utilized to carry candles and oil lamps to hospitals, to scour the countryside for every available horse, and to ride through the city in an effort to calm the people. Firemen were marched to various points of vantage with axes and chemical containers, to combat any fire that might break out. But in the aggregate these precautions amounted to nothing. Whole hospitals passed the night in darkness; patients died by the

hundreds; the flames of myriad fires lit up the sky; and rumors ran from mouth to mouth adding to the terror and chaos.

America, screamed the mobs, was being attacked by a foreign power. The power-houses had been rendered useless by a powerful magnet. There had been a terrible storm down south; all South America was sinking; North America would go next. No one knew anything; everyone knew something. Nothing was too wild or absurd for millions to believe. Deprived of their accustomed sources of information, the inhabitants became a prey to their own fancies and the disordered fancies of others. Religious fanatics by the light of huge bonfires preached the second coming of Christ and the destruction of the world. Thousands of hysterical people prostrated themselves on the hard street pavements, babbling, weeping, praying. Thousands of others looted wine and strong drinks from the cellars of hotels and cafés and reeled drunken through the streets, adding to the din and the panic. Nor did daylight bring much relief. For some obscure reason, all over Europe, Asia, and America, during the hours of daylight, the sky was strangely dulled. Seemingly the sun shone with all its usual splendor, but the air was perceptibly darkened. Why this should be so not even the scientists could tell. Yet even under the light of what millions of people on earth believed to be their last day, human wolves came out of their dens and prowled through the cities, sacking stores and private homes, blowing open safes, and killing and robbing with impunity. The day that succeeded the night was more horrible than the night that preceded the day, because hundreds of thousands of people who had slept through the hours of darkness awoke and joined their fellows on the streets, and because there is something terrible about a big city in which no cars run and no factory whistles blow, in which the machine has died.

And while the cities and the inhabitants thereof were given over to madness and destruction, tragedy took its toll of the skies and stalked the seas. The aircraft of the world were virtually wiped out. Only those escaped which were at rest in their hangars, or which by some miracle of navigation glided safely to earth. Hardly a year passes now but that on some wild mountain peak, or in a gloomy canyon or the heart of the Sahara, fragments of those airships are found. Nor did ocean-going vessels suffer less. In the space of twenty hours, two thousand ships of all classes and tonnage met with disaster— disaster that ultimately wiped out the great firm of Lloyds, in London, and a host of lesser insurance companies. Fifteen hundred steamers vanished, never to be heard of more, thirty-five of these being giant passenger boats carrying upward of twenty thousand passengers. Of the other five hundred ships, some were dashed to pieces on inhospitable coasts, others drifted ashore and broke up, and the remainder were abandoned at sea. The

fate of the missing steamers may be partly inferred from what happened to the *Olympia* and the *Oranta*. This is taken from the account of the second officer of the former ship:

"The night was clear and starry, a heavy sea running. We were forging full speed ahead about two hundred miles off the Irish coast. Because of our electrically controlled gyroscope, however, the ship was as steady as a rock. A dance was being given in both the first and second class ballrooms, the music for them being supplied by the Metropolitan dance orchestra of London. In the third class theater a television moving-picture was being shown. Couples were walking or sitting on the promenade decks as, though a stiff breeze was blowing, the night was warm. From the bridge I could see the *Orania* coming toward us. She made a wonderful sight, her portholes gleaming tier on tier, and her deck lights glowing and winking, for all the world looking like a giant glowworm or a fabulous trireme. Doubtless, to watchers on her bridge and decks, we presented the same glorious sight, because we were sister ships, belonging to the same line, and of the same build and tonnage. All the time she was coming up I conversed with the first officer on her bridge by means of our wireless phone; and it was while in the midst of this conversation, and while we were still a mile apart and he was preparing (so he said) to have the wheel put over so as to take the *Orania* to starboard of us that, without warning, her lights went out.

"Hardly crediting my eyes, I stared at the spot where a moment before she had been. 'What is the matter with you?' I called through my phone, but there was no answer; and even as I realized that the phone had gone dead, I was overcome with the knowledge that my own ship was plunged in darkness. The decks beneath me were black. I could hear the voices of passengers calling out, some in jest and others in rising alarm, questioning what had happened. 'I can't get the engine room; the ship doesn't answer her helm.' I said, facing the captain, who had clambered to the bridge. 'Quick, Mr. Crowley!' he cried. 'Down with you and turn out the crew. Put men at every cabin door and stairway and keep the passengers off the decks.' His voice thundered into the microphone, which repeated his words through loud-speaking devices in every saloon, cabin, and on every deck of the ship— or should have so repeated them if the instruments had been functioning. 'There is no need for alarm. A little trouble to the engines, and incidentally to the dynamos, has caused the lights to go out. I beg of you to be calm. In a half-hour everything will be fixed,' But even as I rushed to obey his orders, even as his crisp voice rang out on the night-air, I saw the enormous dark bulk bearing down on us, and the heart leapt in my throat. It was the Orania, helpless, without guidance, as were we

ourselves, rushing ahead under the momentum acquired by her now stilled engines.

"She struck us, bow on, to one side, shearing through steel plates as if they were so much cheese. At that terrific impact, in the dark and the gloom, all order and discipline were swept away. Something had happened to the gyroscopes, and the ships were pitching and tossing, grinding and crashing against each other, our own ship settling by the head, the stern rising.

"Then ensued a terrible time. The night became hideous with the clamor of terrified voices. Maddened passengers fought their ways to the decks, and to the boats. Crowded boats went down into the surging waves bow on or stern first, spilling their human freight into the sea. Hundreds of passengers, believing that the steamers would at any moment sink, leapt overboard with life-preservers, and in nearly all cases were drowned. All this in the first thirty minutes. After that the panic ebbed; it turned into dull despair. The crews of both steamers, what could be rallied of them, began to control the situation.

"Morning found the *Orania* practically intact, only making water in her No. 1 compartment. The *Olympia* forward compartments were all flooded, taking her down at the head, but the rear eight still held intact, and as long as they did so she could not sink. If the passengers had, from the beginning, remained calm and tractable, hardly a life need have been lost."

The second officer of the *Olympia* goes on to point out that both the giant liners had been thoroughly equipped with the most modern of electromechanical devices for use in emergencies; that they carried twin power-receiving engines; that they were electrically steered; and that from the pilot-house and the bridge communication could be had and orders and instructions given, to crew and passengers in every part of the ships. It was, he points out, the sudden and startling going out of the lights, and the totally unexpected breakdown of all machinery, which precipitated the tragedy, and not any negligence on the part of the officers and the crews.

Such is the story of one marine disaster; but the records are full of similar accounts, hundreds of them, which it is needless to set down here.

iii

ON THE Pacific coast, especially in the cities of Los Angeles and San Francisco, better order was maintained than in the big cities of the Middle West and the East. Panic there was loss of life and damage to property both from fire and theft, but not on so colossal a scale. This was due to the fact that the authorities had several hours of daylight in which to prepare for darkness, and because in the two cities mentioned there were no subways to speak of. In

the downtown districts clerks and businessmen were advised to stick to their offices and stores. Policemen, mounted and afoot, were sent to the residential districts and to the factories. Instead of allowing the workers to scatter, they formed them into groups of twenty, deputized, armed, and as nearly as possible set to patrolling the streets of the neighborhoods in which they lived. These prompt measures did much to avert the worst features of the horrors which swept New York and Chicago and the cities of Europe and Asia. But in spite of them the hospitals knew untold suffering, whole city blocks were destroyed by flames, religious frenzy ran high, and millions of people passed the hours of darkness in fear and trembling.

I was twenty-two at that time, living in Altadena, which is a suburb of Pasadena, about twenty miles from Los Angeles, and trying to write. That morning I had taken a book and a lunch and climbed up the Old Pole Road to the top of Mount Echo, intending to return by the cable car which for years has operated from the purple depths of Rubio Canyon to the towering peak. I reached the top of the mountain after a steep climb, ate my lunch on the site of the old Lowe Observatory, and then became absorbed in my book.

The first inkling I had that something was wrong was when the light darkened. "It's clouding over," I thought, looking up, but the sky overhead was perfectly clear, the sun particularly bright.

Not a little disturbed in mind, and thinking, I must admit, of earthquakes, I strolled over to where a group of Mexican section workers, under the supervision of a white boss, had been doing some track repairing. The Mexicans were gesticulating and pointing to the cities and the countryside rolling away far beneath us. Now usually on a clear, sunny day there is a haze in the valley and one can not see for very many miles in any direction. But on this day there was an unwonted clarity in the air. Everything on which we gazed was sharply etched—no blurring, no fogging of lines. The houses stood out starkly; so did the spires of churches and the domes of public buildings. Though it was miles away to the westward, the mighty tower of the Los Angeles City Hall could be plainly seen. The light had darkened, yes; but the effect was that of gazing through slightly tinted glasses.

"What do you think it means?" I asked the track boss. But before he could make a reply, a Mexican cried out volubly, pointing one shaking hand up the steep ridge which rose behind us and crossing himself rapidly with the other.

It was an awe-inspiring sight on which we gazed. Over Mount Lowe a luminous, dancing light was growing. I did not know it then, but as far east as Denver and Omaha, and as far south as St. Louis and Galveston, men saw that light. Seen from the western cities of Calgary and Edmonton in Canada it was a pillar of blue flame growing out of the earth and, as the hours passed,

mounting higher and higher into the heavens. Millions of eyes from all over the United States and the Dominion fearfully and superstitiously turned toward that glow. As night deepened upon the Pacific coast, the inhabitants of Southern California saw the sky to the north of them cloven asunder by a leaping sword. No wonder millions of people thought that the heavens had opened and Christ was coming.

But before night I had descended the steep slope of Mount Echo and walked the trackway into Altadena. Women and men called to me from doorways and wanted to know if there was a forest fire farther back in the hills. I could give them no answer. On Lake Avenue I saw the automobiles, street-cars, and motor-busses stranded.

"What is the matter?" I asked a conductor.

"I don't know," he said. "There isn't any power. They say all the power plants and machinery have stopped. A man rode through from downtown a few minutes ago and told us so."

I walked on into Pasadena. Everything was tied up. The streets were jammed with cars and people. Owing to the state ordinance which made it a penal offense for planes to fly over any California city—the air routes were so arranged, and the landing-stations and fields outside the cities, access to them being had by fast electric trains— the horror of airships falling on crowed city streets and on residences was entirely averted. People spoke, however, of having seen a huge air liner and some smaller pleasure planes plunging to earth to the west of them, turning over and over; and afterward I learned that the New York-Los Angeles special, which had just taken the air, had crashed into an orchard with a terrible loss of life.

I went no farther than Madison Street on Colorado Boulevard and turned back. It was ominous to look from the windows and porches of the big house that night and see the city black and formless beneath us. Usually the horizon to the west and south was illuminated for thirty miles around. Now, save for the dull glare of several fires, the darkness was unbroken.

Everything that happened that night is printed indelibly on my memory. Far off, like the sound of surf beating on a rocky shore, we could hear the voice of the mob. It rose and fell, rose and fell. And once we heard the crackle of what we took to be machine-gun fire. In the Flintridge district, I heard later, houses were sacked and looted. Some men defending their homes were murdered and several women badly treated. But in Altadena, up in the foothills, no one suffered any violence. Only once were we alarmed by a procession marching up Lake Avenue, bearing torches and chanting hymns. It was a body of religious fanatics, Holy Rollers, men, women, and children, on their way-to Mount Wilson, the better to wait the advent of Jesus, We could hear them

shouting and singing, and in the flickering light of the torches, see them frothing at the mouth. They went by, and after that, save for a patrol from the sheriff's office, we saw no one until morning.

Dawn came, but if anything the tension and terror grew greater. All night the threatening scimitar of light over the mountains had grown taller and taller—one could see it literally growing— and the sinister brightness of it radiated like molten steel, nor did the coming of daylight dim its radiance.

None of us had slept during the night; none of us had thought of sleep. Haggard-faced we greeted the dawn, and with despair in our hearts realized that the light of day was perceptibly dimmer than it had been the day before. Could this actually be the end of the world? Were those poor fanatics who had gone by in the night right, and were the heavens opening, as they said? These, and more, were the thoughts that ran through my mind. Then— came the end!

It was 6 p. m. in London, 1 p. m. in New York, and 10 a. m. on the coast when it happened. Millions of people saw the pillar of light waver. For one pregnant moment it grew red-hot, with the crimson redness of heated iron. From its lofty summit, jagged forks of lightning leapt across the heavens and blinded the sight of those that watched. Then it vanished, was gone; and a few minutes after its going the street lights came on, the day brightened, telephone bells rang, wheels turned, and the twenty or so hours of terror and anarchy were ended!

iv

WHAT had been the cause of it all? No one knew. Learned men puzzled their heads over the problem. Scientists were baffled for an adequate answer. Many explanations were advanced, of course, but none of them held water. For a while there was a tendency on the part of various governments to suspect one another of having invented and utilized a fiendish machine for the undoing of rival nations. However, this suspicion was speedily dropped when it was realized how world-wide had been the nature of the disaster. Dr. LeMont of the Paris Astronomical League advanced the theory that the spots on the sun had something to do with the phenomenon; Doolittle of the Royal Academy of Science in London was of the opinion that the Cosmic Ray discovered by Millikan in 1928 was responsible; while others not so highly placed in the world of science as these two outstanding celebrities suggested anything from a dark comet, a falling meteor, to disturbances in the magnetic centers of the earth. The *Encyclopedia Britannica*, twenty-one years after the disaster which nearly wrecked civilization and perhaps the world, quotes the above theories in detail, and many more besides, but winds up with the

assertion that nothing authentic as to the cause of the tragedy of 1956 has ever been forthcoming. This assertion is not true. In the fall of 1963 there was placed before the Royal Academy of Science in Canada evidence as to the origin of the great catastrophe sufficient to call forth an extended investigation on the part of that body.

Though eighteen years have passed since then, the results of that investigation have never been made public. I will not speculate as to the reason for that. In the interim a report was made of the matter to the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, to the Royal Academy of Science in London, and to the Paris Astronomical League in France— a report which these learned bodies chose to ignore. And what was the evidence the Royal Academy of Science in Canada investigated?

As I have already stated, I was in California in 1956 and lived through one phase of the great disaster. Three years later— in the summer of 1959— having broken into the pages of some of the better class magazines with my stories, I made a trip to western Canada for the purpose of writing a series of stories for a western journal. It was there, miles from any city and in the foothills of the Rockies, that I met and listened to the story of the dying recluse. He was a young man, I judged, not a whit older than myself, but in the last stages of consumption.

I came upon the ranch-house— a four-room cabin made of split logs and undressed stone— after a hard day's ride. I pitched my tent on the banks of a tumbling mountain stream about a quarter of a mile from the house, and gladly accepted the invitation of the comely young mistress of the place to take dinner with them that evening. She was, I gleaned, the sick man's sister. Her husband, now absent rounding up cattle, was proving up on an adjoining quarter section, having already done so on two others in his wife's and brother-in-law's names.

After dinner I sat on the wide veranda with the sick man, whose sleeping-porch I surmised it was, talking with him and smoking my pipe.

"Visitors are rare out this way," he said, "and an educated man a godsend."

I was surprised to find him a man of no little education himself.

"You went to college?" I hazarded.

"Yes, McGill. I took my B. A. And after that, two years of medicine."

Over the plains the sun had sunk in red splendor below the horizon and the sky was on fire with its reflected glory. Nearer in I saw a ragged black splotch on the billowing earth, burnt-looking, charred.

"A prairie fire," I not so much questioned as stated.

The invalid, propped up on his couch, followed my finger with his cavernous black eyes.

"No," he said. "No. That is where it— was."

"It?" I queried.

"Yes," he replied; what the papers called the pillar of fire."

Then I remembered, of course. The burnt splotch was the place where the terrible luminous glow, the cleaving sword I had seen over Mount Lowe, had had its source. I stared, fascinated.

"Nothing," said the man on the couch, "will grow there— since then. The soil has no life in it— no life. It is," he said faintly, "like ashes— black ashes."

Silence fell between us for many minutes. The shadows lengthened and the twilight deepened. It was mournful sitting there in the growing gloom, and I felt relieved when the woman turned on the light in the sitting-room and its cheerful rays flooded through the open windows and the doorway. Finally the invalid said:

"I was here at the time. My sister and her husband were absent on a visit to his folks in Calgary."

"It must have been a stupendous sight," I remarked for want of a better thing to say.

"It was hell," he said. "That's how I got this," tapping himself on the chest and bringing on a fit of coughing. "The air," he gasped; "it was hard on the lungs."

His sister came out and gave him some medicine from a black bottle.

"You mustn't talk so much, Peter; it isn't good for you," she admonished.

He waved an impatient hand, "Let be!" he said. "Let be! What difference does it make? In another day, another week—"

His voice trailed away and then picked up again on a new sentence.

"Oh, don't pity me! Don't waste your pity on the likes of me! If ever a wretch deserved his fate, I deserve mine. Three years now I've suffered the tortures of the damned. Not of flesh alone, but of mind. When I could still walk about, it wasn't so bad; but since I've been chained to this bed I've done nothing but think, think.... I think of the great disaster; of the hours of terror and despair known by millions of people. I think of the thousands and thousands of men, women and children trapped in subways and theaters, trampled to death, butchered, murdered. I visualize the hospitals full of the sick and the dying, the giant liners of the air and of the ocean crashing, colliding, going down into the sea; and I seem to hear the screams and the pitiful prayers for help of the maddened passengers. Tell me, what fate should befall the fiend who would loose such woe and misery on an unsuspecting world?"

"There, there," I said soothingly, thinking him delirious, judging his mind unhinged from too much morbid brooding. "It was frightful, of course, but no one could help what happened— no one."

But my words did not calm him. On the contrary they added to his excitement. "That isn't true," he gasped. "It isn't true. No, no, sister, I won't be still, I'm not raving! Give me a drop of brandy— so; and bring me the little cedar box from the cupboard over there."

She complied with his request.

"It's all written down and put away in here," he said, tapping the box. "Put away in here, along with the third crystal which came home in the saddle-bag of John's runaway horse."

His eyes were like two black coals fastened on my face.

"I've told no one," he said tensely "but I can't keep silent any longer. I must speak! I must!"

One of his feverish hands gripped my own. "Don't you understand?" he cried. "I'm the fiend who caused the great world disaster. God help me! I, and one other!

"No, no he said, correctly reading the look on my face, "I'm not crazy, I'm not raving. It is God's truth I'm telling you, and the evidence of it is in this cedar box. It began in Montreal when I was going to McGill University. The under-professor of physics there was a young French-Canadian by the name of John Cabot. He—"

A fit of coughing stopped his voice. His sister gave him a sip of water.

"Peter," she pleaded, "let it go for tonight. Tomorrow—"

But he shook his head. "I may be dead tomorrow. Let me talk now." His eyes sought mine. "Did you ever hear about the meteorite that fell back in Manitoba in 1954?"

"No."

"Nor about the seven crystals that were found in it?"

"I don't remember."

"Well, they were found," he said; "seven of them as large as grapefruit. There's nothing remarkable about finding crystals in a meteorite. That has been done before and since. But those seven crystals were not ordinary ones. They were perfectly rounded and polished, as if by hand. Nor was that all: at the core of each of them was a vibrant fluid, and in that fluid was a black spot—"

A spasm of coughing choked his utterance, and this time I joined with his sister in urging him to rest, but desisted when I saw that such advice, and any effort on my part to withdraw, only succeeded in adding to his painful excitement.

"A black spot," he gasped, "that danced and whirled and was never still. Don't try to stop me! I must tell you about it! The scientists of the world were all agog over them. Where, they asked, had the meteor come from, and what were the fluid and the spot at the center of each crystal? In the course of time the crystals were sent various places for observation and study. One went to England, another to France, two to Washington, while the remaining three stayed in Canada, finally coming to rest in the Museum of Natural Science in Montreal which is now under the jurisdiction of McGill University.

"It was during my first year at medical school that I entered the museum one afternoon, almost by accident. The sight of the crystals, newly exhibited, fascinated me. I could hardly tear myself away in time for a lecture.

"The next afternoon I came again. I watched the black spots dancing in their vibrant fluid. Sometimes they would whirl in the center of the liquid with monotonous regularity. Then suddenly they would dash at the walls which held them in and circle them with inconceivable speed. Was it my imagination, or did the specks take on shape or form? Were they prisoners forever beating their heads against the bars of a cell, seeking to be free? Engrossed in such thoughts I did not know that another had entered the museum until a voice addressed me.

" 'So you have come under their spell, too, Ross.'

"I looked up with a start and recognized John Cabot. We knew each other, of course, Because I had studied under him for two years.

" 'They look so life-like, sir,' I replied. 'Haven't you noticed it?'

" 'Perhaps,' he said quietly, 'they are life.'

"The thought stirred my imagination.

" 'You know,' he went on, 'that there are scientists who claim life originally came to the earth from some other star, perhaps from outside the universe entirely. Maybe,' he said, 'it came, even as these crystals came, in a meteor.' "

The sick man paused and moistened his lips with water.

"That," he said, "was the beginning of the intimacy which sprang up between John Cabot and me. It was often possible for Cabot to take one of the crystals to his room, and then we would foregather there and ponder the mystery of it, Cabot was a sound teacher of physics, but he was more than that. He was a scientist who was also a speculative philosopher, which meant being something of a mystic. Have you ever studied mysticism? No? Then I can't tell you about that. Only from him and his speculations I struck fire. How can I describe it? Perhaps gazing in the crystal hypnotized us both. I don't know as to that. Only night and day both of us became eaten with an overwhelming curiosity.

" 'What do the scientists say is inside the crystals?' I asked Cabot.

" 'They don't say,' he replied. 'They don't know. A message from Mars perhaps, or from beyond the Milky Way.'

"From beyond the Milky Way," whispered the sick man. "Can't you see what that would mean to our imaginations?"

He beat the quilt that covered him with his hand.

"It meant," he said, "the forbidden. We dreamed of doing what the scientists of America and Europe said they hesitated to do for fear of the consequences— or for fear of destroying objects valuable to science. We dreamed of breaking the crystal!"

A big moth fluttered into the radius of light and the dying man followed it with his eyes. "That's what we were, Cabot and I, though we didn't know it: moths, trying to reach a searing flame."

By this time I was engrossed in his story. "What then?" I prompted.

"We stole the crystals! Perhaps you read about it at the time?"

I shook my head.

"Well, it was in all the papers."

Í explained that in those days I had seldom seen a paper from one week's end to another. He nodded feebly.

"That accounts for it, then. The theft caused a sensation in university circles, and both Cabot and I were thoroughly questioned and searched. But we had been too clever!" The sick man laughed mirthlessly. "God help us! too clever! What wouldn't I give now," cried Peter Ross bitterly, "if we had been discovered! But a malignant fate ordered otherwise. We were successful. During the holidays I took the crystal home with me, home, to these hills and plains. Later Cabot joined me."

He broke off for a moment as if exhausted.

"I wonder," he said, after a few minutes, "if I can make what we felt and thought clear to you. It wasn't just idle curiosity that was driving us. No! It was more than that. Out of the unknown itself had come a meteor with a message for mankind. Something stupendous was hidden in the cores of those crystals. Yet what had the scientists of the world done? They had contented themselves with weighing the crystals, looking at them under a microscope, photographing them, writing learned articles about them, and then putting them away on museum shelves! None of them— not one; or so it seemed to us— had had the courage to open a crystal. Their reasons— deadly germs, virulent forms of life, terrific explosions— we dismissed as cowardly vaporings. The time had come, we said, to investigate more thoroughly. God help us," whispered Peter Ross, "we blinded ourselves to what might be the consequences of our rash experiment! We eased our consciences with the reflection that we were safeguarding humanity from any danger by carrying it out in the wilderness,

miles from any city or human habitation. If there were to be any martyrs, we thought egotistically, it would be us alone. We had, of course, no inkling of the terrible force we were about to loose.

"Early in the morning of the day of the disaster we rode from this place down there to the plains, down to where you saw that charred splotch. We had with us a portable outfit of chemical instruments. It was our intention to smash one of the crystals, catch the fluid in our test-tubes, isolate the black spot, and make an analysis of it and the liquid later. But we never did," he said; "we never did."

A cough rattled in his throat.

"It was Cabot who broke the crystal. Before noon, it was, but I'm not sure of the time. He knew how to do it; he had all the tools necessary. The crystal lay inside a metal container. I tell you there was something uncanny about it glimmering in the sun! The black spot was whirling madly, dashing itself with violence against the restraining walls as if it sensed that freedom was near.

" 'Look at him,' said Cabot tensely. 'Look at him leaping and kicking. What a dancer! What a— in a minute now and he'll be out of that!"

"Perhaps it was the phrase; perhaps it was the masculine pronoun used in connection with the black spot; but suddenly I was afraid of the thing we would do. Fearful possibilities ran through my mind.

" 'John,' I cried, stepping back several paces, 'John, don't!'

"But Cabot never heard me. His hand went up with the heavy hammer.

"Poor John! Nothing warned him—nothing stayed him!

"The blow came down. I heard the tinkling crash; then—

" 'Oh my God!'

"It was Cabot's voice in a shrill scream of unutterable horror and agony. His bent figure straightened up, and from his hair and his outflung arms blue lights crackled and streamed, and all around his body a column of something shimmered and shifted and grew. So for a moment he postured; then he began to dance. I tell you he began to dance, not by any force or power that resided in his own limbs, but as if he were jerked or writhed about by an external agent. I saw what that agent was. It was the black spot! Out of the ground it rose like an evil jinnee and took on the form and shape of something monstrous, inhuman, horrible. It leapt and whirled; and yes, though I couldn't hear it, it sang and shouted. It was the nucleus of an increasing body of light. I felt searing heat scorch my cheeks and burn my throat with every breath I drew. More! I felt that streaming fingers of light were reaching out at me, clutching.

"With a sob of fear I turned and ran. Cabot's horse had broken loose and was running wildly across the plains. My own was plunging madly at the end of

its picket rope. Somehow I mounted and fled, but after several miles of such flight my horse put its hoof in a prairie-dog hole and broke its leg, pitching me over its head.

"How long I lay dead to the world I don't know; but the long shadows were running eastward when I came to. The air was acrid and bitter. With fearful eyes I saw that the day was unaccountably dark and that the pillar of fire out on the plains had grown to immense proportions. Even as I gazed on it, it grew. Hour after hour it grew, adding to its circumference and height. From the four corners of the horizon, in mighty arches that dipped to a common center, flowed infinitesimal particles of what seemed golden dust. I know now that all the electricity was being sucked out of the air, darkening the day, blackening the night, and rendering all machinery useless. But then I knew only that the pillar of fire, the center to which those particles cohered, was drawing nearer and nearer to where I lay. For I could barely move, my feet seemed like lead, and there was a tight band round my chest.

"Perhaps I was delirious, out of my head; I do not know, but I got on my feet and walked and walked, and when I couldn't walk I crawled. Hours and hours I crawled, driven ahead by a growing horror of the nightmare that pursued me; yet when I stopped, exhausted, I was still far away from the foothills and the pillar of fire was nearer than ever. I could see the monstrous black thing inside of it dancing and whirling. My God! It was reaching out dark streamers of fire after me; it was calling out that it wanted me, that it would have me, that nothing this side of heaven or hell could keep it from me; and as it shot this implacable message into my senses, it grew bigger, it danced faster, and it came closer.

"Again I staggered to my feet and ran. Late night found me several miles below here, quenching my thirst at a spring of water which trickles from the side of a rock. I looked back, and the pillar of fire was now so high that it lost itself in the heavens. All around me played a livid light, a light that flung the shape of a gigantic dancing horror this way and that. Did I tell you that this light was like a pillar? Yes, it was like a pillar whose middle swelled out in a great arc; and I knew that I was doomed, that I could not escape, and swooning horror overcame me and I fell to the ground and buried my face in my hands.

"Hours passed— or was it only minutes? I cannot say. I could feel my body writhing, twisting. Every atom of my flesh was vibrating to an unnatural rhythm. I was crazy, yes, out of my head, delirious, but I swear to you that I heard John Cabot crying to me, imploring, 'For God's sake, break the crystal, break the crystal!' and I cried back into my huddled arms not speaking, yet screaming it, 'We broke the crystal! God help us! We broke the crystal!'

"Then suddenly it came to me that he meant the second crystal. Yes, yes, I understood. The fiendish thing out there on the plain was seeking, not me but its counterpart.

"The second crystal was in the knapsack still swung on my back. With insane fury I tore it out of its padded, protected housing and whirled it over my head. Filled with loathing of the terrible thing, I flung it from me as far as the strength of my arm would permit. Perhaps twenty yards away it crashed into a rock and was shattered to pieces. I saw the slivers of it glint and flash; then from the spot where it struck rose a column of light, and in the column of light was a whirling speck. Like its predecessor it grew and grew, and as it grew, receded from me in the direction of the mightier pillar whirling and calling. How can I tell you of the weird dance of the evil ones? They sang to each other, and I know the song they sang, but I cannot tell it to you because it was not sung in words.

"At what hour they came together, whether it was day or night, I do not know. Only I saw them merge. With their coming together the terrible power that was sucking in the world's electrical forces to one gigantic center became neutralized. The heavens split open as the bolts of lightning devastated the sky. Through the rent firmament I saw a black shape cleave its way. Whatever had been in the two crystals was leaving the earth, was plunging through the Milky Way, through the incalculable spaces beyond the reach of our most powerful telescopes, back back..."

TWO DAYS later, in a grave beside the tumbling mountain stream, his brother-in-law and I buried all that was mortal of Peter Ross. Over his resting-place we piled a great cairn of rocks so that the spring floods might not wash his body away nor coyotes worry the tomb of the dead. When I parted with the bereaved sister, she pressed me to accept the cedar box.

"Poor Peter!" she said. "Toward the last he ran a fever all the time and was delirious; but he wanted you to have the box, and so you must take it."

I saw that she attached no importance to his story.

"He never mentioned it before," she said; "he was out of his head."

And so I was inclined to believe until I examined the contents of the box. Then I changed my mind. If what he told us had been naught but the result of morbid brooding and delirium, then he must have been morbid and delirious for years preceding his death, because the written version of his story began simply, "It is nearly a year now since," and was a bare recital of facts, written plainly and in the manner of a man with no especial gift for expressing himself in words. Nor was that all. Besides the manuscript mentioned were revealed various letters which I perused, letters from Cabot to Ross, Ross to Cabot,

covering a period of years and telling of their ideas and plans and of the theft of the crystals. The whole story, save for its denouement, could be pieced together from those letters.

Incredible as Peter Ross's tale had sounded in the telling, wild and incoherent though it had been, and colored with fever and delirium none the less it was true. And as if to rout whatever disbelief might be still lurking in my mind, I saw that which finally led me to place the whole matter before the Royal Academy of Science in Canada, and before various other scientific bodies, as I have recorded; and which in this latter day, so that mankind may be warned against the menace imprisoned in the crystals, has made me put everything down here: the crowning evidence of all. For in the bottom of the box was a round object; and when I picked it up, my fascinated eyes were held by a transparent bubble the size of an orange with a black spot at its core, dancing, dancing....

5: The Picture

Weird Tales Feb-March 1931

THE room was in complete darkness. "O Liam Maroo," chanted the man. The blackness was like a thick velvet against his face. He spoke the words that for twenty thousand years no human voice had uttered. Far off, in an infinity of night, grew a red spot, lurid, uncanny to behold. The man shuddered. Almost he dashed to pieces the fragile contrivance that for three weeks, night after night, in this miserable room, he had brought to completion. But his will conquered. In a voice almost inaudible he said the seven necessary words and made the seven unspeakable motions. The red spot grew, expanded. In the center of the red spot formed a face, a terrible face, an unhuman face, the face of Liam Maroo, the World Ancient.

"I am here,'' said the face.

The man fought the faintness that threatened to engulf his senses. "O Liam Maroo," he whispered, "the deed has been done, the altar raised. For seven nights I have conjured you by the seven necessary words, and the seven unspeakable motions. Speak, have I not fulfilled the ancient bargain?"

"You have fulfilled," said the face. "Then by the Book of Him Who First Conjured, I call upon you to fulfill yours."

"It is well," said the face. "What is your wish?"

"Power," answered the man. "Power. I who have been weak, would be strong. I who have been poor and lowly, would be high and mighty. I who have known the contempt of men, would know their envy and servility. I who have known poverty and hunger, would know riches and plenty. Give me power."

His voice at last rang like a trumpet, growing stronger with every word uttered, and he leaned forward in his eagerness until in front of him the invisible contrivance creaked and swayed.

"Power," said the face thoughtfully. "Would it not be better to do as Suliman, and ask nothing but wisdom?"

"Nay," said the man. "Suliman was already a king, and rich. Wisdom added to power and riches made him greater. But without power even Wisdom can die in the gutter."

"True," said the face; "and by the choice you make you prove yourself already wise. You would have power, power to sway men, power to create and hold riches. It is well. Such power is yours, such power I endow you with— but at a price."

"My soul?" said the man. "It is yours; take it."

"Soul!" echoed the face. "Whom do you take me for— Mephistopheles? Only the Antagonist could barter for your soul. To me it is worthless. Not your soul."

"Not my soul," echoed the man. "Then name what you will."

The unhuman face of Liam Maroo regarded the man intently. "Power, riches, the magnetism that sways men, all these I give you, and in return you shall pay to me the woman you love."

"The woman I love! But I love no woman," said the man.

"You will," said the face. "If you accept my offer you are fated to meet her. This, then, is the price I ask, that at the time I choose you shall sacrifice to me her brain, and her heart, and—"

The man listened to the last horrid detail of the sacrificial rite and shuddered. In the deep darkness his cheeks blanched, and for a moment he hesitated. But the overwhelming ambition that had driven him to master the secret of the Book of Him Who First Conjured, that had nerved him, in spite of superstitious fears, to raise the altar, practise the awful and uncanny ritual, would not now let him retreat. What! to forego his heart's desire for a woman he did not as yet know and for whom he cared nothing?

"I accept," he said hoarsely. "The woman is yours."

Was it pity that flitted across the remote, unhuman countenance of Liam Maroo?

"Think well," said the face warningly.

"I have thought," said the man.

"Let the pact be signed," said the face.

Then followed a ceremony that can never be described in words. The red spot grew until it filled the room with its lurid glow. The troglodytes came, and the three things of which Radge Oep speaks in that book which no one now understands. The man was bound with the serpents, one of which knew Eve. He was scourged with seven whips fashioned of scorpions. Then came The Horns and pierced him in a secret spot. After that...

But it is well to be silent. In time the red light went as it had come. The room was dark. Dawn came, and the sun shone over the roof-tops and through the single window of the room and revealed its squalid meagerness. There was nothing to see, save a soap-box on end, seven pieces of shaving, a chalked diagram on the floor, and the body of a man lying heavy in sleep across a sagging bed.

THE RISE of Jim James to wealth and power was phenomenal, even for that traditional land of opportunity and of startling financial successes, America. Carnegie rose from poor boy to steel magnate; Rockefeller from obscure clerk to millionaire oil baron; Henry Ford developed the cheap automobile industry and became one of the uncrowned kings of business. But sensational as were the financial successes of these men there was nothing mysterious about them.

One could follow the process of their emergence from comparative poverty to money masters, over a period of years. But at thirty-five Jim James was working as a dishwasher in the kitchen of O Come Inn restaurant on Congress Avenue, Tucson, Arizona, for twelve dollars a week. This was in the spring of 1930.

He was then a thin-faced, slender, dried-up wisp of a man weighing no more than a hundred and twenty pounds. His chin habitually showed a stubble of dirty-black beard and he went clad in a shapeless pair of trousers, frayed at the bottoms, and in a khaki shirt, shiny on the bosom and far from clean.

Before that he had been a tramp, a bindlestiff, a laborer in the oil fields, an insignificant migratory worker whom people spoke of— if they ever spoke of him at all— as slightly cracked. He was queer, in those days something of a butt. He never resented an insult, a sneer. He went his way, silent, almost furtive. Only his eyes showed any force, any vitality; but as he never looked anyone directly in the face, few noticed them. With him he always carried a book. It was the same book; an odd yellow-looking volume he had picked up God knows where. Always, in camps, in jungles, by the side of the roads, he was reading in this book. When he thought himself alone he would sing-song certain unintelligible sentences in an alien gibberish. Also he would build strange little contrivances of sticks and stones and draw diagrams in the dust. Naturally this aroused the curiosity of his fellow hoboes. Several times men took the volume away from him and examined it, only to find the printing fine and in unintelligible characters, with weird drawings and designs on alternate pages that suggested nothing to them save that he who could be interested in such truck must be daffy. So they threw the book back to him with good-natured oaths and gibes.

Seemingly, Jim James never resented these outrages. He surrendered the book without struggle, received it back with no audible comment, and in time men ceased bothering him. So much of his life is authentic. But before that, who he was, where he came from, is shrouded in mystery. Then came the spring of 1930, the dish-washing job, and the first of the mysterious happenings which in a few weeks was to lift this vagabond, this insignificant

menial and reputed daft person out of poverty and squalor and make him one of the most envied and talked-of persons in America, in time of the world.

He was late for work that morning. Usually he was at the dishpan by seven. But it was nine when he came through the cafe door. Matt Dowden, the stout, big-stomached proprietor, intended to bawl him out. But the irate words died in his throat. Even Matt Dowden could see that there was some magical change in his erstwhile dish-washer. For the first time he experienced the sensation of having Jim James look at him levelly with those strange vital eyes of his.

"I'm quitting the job, Matt," he said in soft, easy tones.

This was another surprize. Jim James had seldom spoken, but when he did he had addressed his employer haltingly, and always as "sir" or "mister." If the dog lying at the door had raised up and bellowed, "Hello, Matt," Matt Dowden couldn't have been more thunderstruck.

"You see," said Jim James conversationally, "I've struck it rich. Yes, gold. Up the street a ways. I'm on my way now to file my claim at the court-house. What do you think of that for a nugget, Matt?"

He threw on the counter a dull glittering mass the size of a large cobblestone. Matt Dowden could scarcely believe his eyes. He picked it up. The thing was surprizingly heavy.

"Keep it," said Jim James indifferently and walked out.

By noon everyone in Tucson knew that Jim James had discovered and filed on a gold mine in a downtown lot back of his lodging-house. At first there was nothing but laughter. Who ever heard of gold in the heart of town? Undoubtedly the man was crazy. But when he began to flood the local assay offices with fabulously rich nuggets, with canvas bags of almost pure gold-dust, opinion changed. In a few days one of the big mining companies had its men on the claim making tests, analyzing the soil, judging the richness of the find. Their reports were breath-taking. The mine was a regular bonanza, incredibly rich. There were millions in it— millions! The newspapers ran screaming headlines:

GOLD STRIKE IN TUCSON!

Business men forgot their business. A rush was made to file on any and everything. From all over the West foot-loose adventurers stampeded into Tucson in one of the most remarkable gold-rushes in history. The big mining company made a cash offer of two hundred thousand dollars to Jim James. Jim James said he wasn't interested. They made it a million. He laughed. "Two

million," he said, "not a cent less." So inside of two weeks they bought him out, and the erstwhile bum and dish-washer was now twice a millionaire.

But no sooner was the mine sold than a strange thing happened. Gold ceased to be found on the fabulously rich claim.

True, mining engineers had sunk their shafts twenty feet into the soil, through sand and quartz almost solid gold. They had assayed this gold at staggering figures to the ton. But the day after the deal was consummated with Jim James the mine proved to contain nothing but worthless sand and rock. The gold had vanished. The experts could hardly believe their senses.

A cry was raised that Jim James had deliberately salted the claim, that he defrauded the mining company out of its purchase price. But there were reports of the chemists and engineers to disprove such charges. How could a poor dishwasher salt a claim for twenty feet into the earth? The gold taken from the claim and still existent ran into the hundreds of thousands of dollars. No, there had been gold in the claim, a small fortune in gold, but the mining experts had overestimated its extent and the lead had petered out. This became the consensus. The mining company finally pocketed its loss, the gold-seekers left town, the business men returned to their businesses. Only the newspapers were heralding the appearance, on the financial stage of the country, of the unique and even mysterious figure of one, Jim James, ex-dishwasher and migratory worker.

iii

THE startling change in the fortunes of Jim James was no more startling than the change in the man himself. Even during the two weeks of the gold rush people noticed this sudden metamorphosis in the insignificant dish-washer. He did not, of course, grow in height, but the straightening of his stooped shoulders, the erect way in which he now carried himself, gave the impression of increased stature. He was almost as self-contained, as silent as ever, but from him exuded a force, a dynamic strength, that was a revelation to those who had known him previously.

"It is incredible," muttered Matt Dowden, "incredible!"

When Jim James had need to speak he spoke softly, without hesitation, his dark eyes fixed unswervingly on those of the people with whom he spoke. When addressing persons in front of him he gave the uncanny impression of looking directly into the face of each individual at one and the same moment. Yet he made no attempt to change his manner of living, wore the same shapeless trousers and greasy shirt.

There were men who had met him on the road, shifty-eyed yeggs and gay-cats who, remembering him as he had been, thought they would blow into town and relieve the old fool of the proceeds of his lucky strike. But they departed after a few days, thoroughly mystified and no richer than when they had come. One or two old-timers he staked with a few dollars. A Mexican who had fed him from time to time was presented with a deed to the small ranch he rented. A few kindnesses of this sort Jim James performed; then one day, still clad in his disreputable clothes, but bearing on his person certain papers of value, he swung aboard an east-bound train and was gone from his old haunts.

Chicago heard of him next. In fact it was in the windy city, the metropolis on the Great Lakes, that he performed the second feat which electrified the world. This was nothing less than to discover a diamond mine in the great dumps which lie in the stockyards section of the city.

Now everyone knows that the diamond is a mineral of great hardness, consisting of crystallized carbon, and found only in certain favorable soils. But in vain diamond experts protested that it was preposterous to talk of mining the precious stone anywhere in Illinois. Jim James was now a wealthy man.

He purchased most of the dumps, including the mineral rights, surrounded his land with armed guards, and proceeded to take out diamonds in spite of the verdict of the experts. Diamonds began to appear on the local markets by the bucketful; they circulated to New York, Boston. Dealers in precious stones were dumfounded. The charge was made that the jewels were paste. But Jim James smiled at this. By every test imaginable the gems were proved genuine. Then it was asserted that they were being manufactured by a chemical process. Diamonds have been so produced, but only through extreme heat and pressure, small in size and far from perfect, and at prohibitive cost. Jim James exploded this theory by inviting chemists and jewelers to his lot and showing them the crude stones. The experts were astounded. The soil was of the kind in which diamonds had never been found, the geological conditions were all unfavorable, yet in spite of these self-evident facts stones were there in profusion, stones in such quantities as to stagger belief. Jim James was flooding the market with them. People whose fortunes were tied up in these precious gems became panic-stricken.

As is well known, diamonds are plentiful enough, but their output is regulated to maintain the price. The International Diamond Trust, the de Beers of Africa, became alarmed. All over the civilized world Jim James and his wonderful find were headline news. The price of diamonds began to drop. There was only one thing for the diamond trust to do. They dared not have an inexhaustible supply of precious gems in the hands of irresponsible people. Jim James must be brought into the syndicate or his mine purchased. The latter

was what was done. The sum paid to Jim James was never made public but the newspapers placed it anywhere from ten million to fifty.

Then came another sensation. No sooner was the deal with Jim James consummated than the diamond mine petered out! The trust found itself in possession of a lot, a hole in the ground, and so much worthless rubble. Having more stones than they knew what to do with from their African and other mines, this did not altogether displease the trust officials. They were angry, of course; they figured that Jim James in some clever and incomprehensible way had bilked them; they decided it was wise to be philosophical and say little. But the newspapers went wild. They connected up the gold-mine incident of Arizona with that of Chicago and turned out sensational story after story.

"Jim James the Man of Mystery." "The Dish-washer with the Midas Touch."

So the captions ran. And while the national and international press was broadcasting wilder and wilder news to an avid reading public, turning out lurid Sunday supplement articles by the carload, there happened a third incident which never reached the papers.

There is in the city of New York a world-famous street. It is the financial center of the nation, some claim of the world. And in this street is a magnificent office building housing the offices of the most powerful banking institution ever organized. The head of the house of Dorgan was the third of this line and was called Peter—a tall, thick-set, heavy-jowled man with iron-gray hair and despotic eyes. He had been born to a king-ship more powerful and real than that of any six monarchs of Europe. His simple name was the awe of princes. His signature on pieces of paper swayed the destinies of nations. Millions of working-men, their happiness and jobs, lay under the soft but ruthless hand of this lord of banking. Wars were made, armies came and went, as his interest dictated. From the cradle up he had been educated and molded with but one purpose in view— the wielding of the autocratic power his money conferred.

He was proud with the pride of an aristocrat; strong, with the strength of an especially tempered blade; pitiless, with the cool indifference of one who had never suffered poverty or want. This gentleman, then, this Peter Dorgan, this scion of a great banking family, was seated in his private office, thoughtfully pulling on a fragrant and very expensive cigar manufactured for his exclusive consumption, when his secretary, without previous warning, ushered into his presence a man, a visitor, a personage upon whom Peter Dorgan had never before set eyes.

To understand the sheer miracle of such a thing happening, one must be made to realize the utter inaccessibility of the king of bankers. Easier would it be for a poor London cockney to win to the person of England's king in

Buckingham Palace than for an ordinary man to have an audience with Peter Dorgan in his office. Even fellow bankers, men of importance in their way, governors, senators, found it next to impossible to arrange interviews with the money king.

Between him and the importunities of the world stood a whole array of henchmen; only they were called doormen, clerks, office-boys, managers, presidents, and vice-presidents. But on the morning in question there had appeared in the general offices a soft-voiced, slender man who asked to see Peter Dorgan. He was moderately well-dressed in a dark sack suit. The hat, a brown velour, he carried in one hand. But it was his smile that was remarkable; that, and his eyes. Stony-faced and remote-appearing clerks found themselves unconsciously warming toward him under the influence of both. Crusty managers forgot to repel him in their usually chilly manner. So the stranger progressed from one clerk to another, from business manager to vice-president, always coming nearer his objective, until at last he stood in the anteroom of the great magnate's sanctum confronting one last obstacle— the money king's secretary.

"It is impossible," said the secretary. "Mr. Dorgan sees few people, and then only by special appointment. I can't understand how you have reached me. Someone will be sorry for this."

He stood up crisply and for the first time looked at the person addressed. The stranger smiled gravely. "I apologize for troubling you."

"Oh, it's no trouble, I assure you," returned the secretary quickly. He found himself liking this man. "Only Mr. Dorgan has made it an invariable rule—"

"A rule," said the stranger quietly, "that doesn't apply to me."

Like one under the influence of a hypnotic spell the secretary did an unprecedented thing. Without knocking at the door or first learning the will of his employer, he ushered the stranger into the presence of the latter. Peter Dorgan was astounded. Never had such conduct occurred before.

"Bentley," he cried sharply, "what does this mean? Who is this man?"

"A gentleman to see you, sir."

"But I have no appointment with any gentleman this morning," frowned Peter Dorgan. "Certainly not with this one."

"But nevertheless, you are pleased to see me," said the stranger softly.

Peter Dorgan's imperious eyes met the level, vital ones of the stranger. At what he seemed to see in them his hard expression altered. Perhaps the cool assurance of the visitor's remark awoke his interest. Be the explanation what it may, he in turn did an unprecedented thing. He waved the secretary from the room and questioned abruptly, "What is your name?"

"Jim James," answered the stranger.

"Jim James," murmured the banker. "I have never—"

Then he gave a little start and his eyes narrowed.

"Ah," said the other quietly, "I see that you have heard of me."

"Could I help doing so when I read the papers?" smiled Peter Dorgan. "You are the man from the West, the dish-washer with the Midas touch."

"Yes," said Jim James, almost dreamily, yet with a suggestion of power that did not escape the magnate. "I have made two fortunes and can make a third and a fourth. Money? It is mine to command. Wealth? I can find it where I please. Power? I intend to have it— through you."

"Through me!"

"Yes, it is the easiest way. Without you I could still be powerful. If I wished I could wrest from you the finacial supremacy of the world. Believe me, it is far better to have me with you than against you."

"You are very confident," said Peter Dorgan.

"With the consciousness of strength," answered Jim James.

The imperious eyes of one, the level, vital eyes of the other, clashed. Peter Dorgan knew men. It was his one outstanding talent.

Besides, for the first time in his hard, self-contained life he felt himself under the sway of another's personality. He who usually dominated was being dominated; he who usually compelled others was himself being compelled. He was conscious of this sudden weakness in himself and yet felt impotent to combat it. As if he sensed the psychological moment, Jim James leaned forward and said: "Gold— it is everywhere. Look! under your hand the desk is solid gold; the walls of the room are gold; and the inkwell is a blood-red ruby!"

Peter Dorgan could scarcely credit the evidence of his eyesight. The dark, heavy-grained desk glittered yellow, the walls reflected the light in red-gold excrescences. And the inkwell? He picked it up. It lay on the palm of his hand like a great drop of blood.

"This is witchcraft," he muttered dazedly.

Jim James said softly: "Think what would happen to the world standard of wealth if gold were to be found as plentiful as sand; if gems and precious jewels became as common as pebbles. The bottom would fall out of the world market, the great financial lords would go down to ruin. What then of the House of Dorgan?" He said softly, "It would be smashed— like that."

There was silence. Peter Dorgan closed his eyes for a moment, and when he opened them again the desk was nothing but a desk of heavy-grained wood, the walls their normal selves, and the inkwell that and nothing else.

"I suppose you know that I could have you declared insane, that—" He wavered to a stop. "What is it you desire?" he asked hoarsely. Jim James told him.

And that is how Jim James made his debut in the financial and social life of the country.

iv

THE ADVENT of Jim James on Wall Street created another sensation.

Everywhere Peter Dorgan introduced him as his partner. He sat on the boards of powerful directorates, not alone as a member, but as a dictator of policies to whom even Peter Dorgan deferred. Men realized that in the person of the ex-hobo and dish-washer, had arisen another great money lord, a titan of business. His wealth grew to be immense, his power practically unbounded. Through it all his quietness, his simplicity of manner never changed. Then suddenly, within two years, he quit active business and began to travel. He travelled like an emperor. Paris knew him, and Berlin. In his personal attire he was, alternately, the form of fashion or the picture of poverty.

If it pleased him to dress in the correct attire of a gentleman today, it also pleased him to go clad as a navvy tomorrow. But in any costume his manner never varied. That strange personality of his had the same effect whether he was clothed in broadcloth or rags.

At Monte Carlo he twelve times broke the bank, playing any and every game, and then purchased the ruined casino for the price of his winnings. For three months he ran the place, taking the gamblers' money six days of the week and distributing it among the losers on the seventh. At the expiration of that time he sold the casino for a song and went on a hunting-trip to Africa....

Jim James was now forty-one, slender, dynamic. Women, of course, he had known. A famous Polish actress had been his mistress for a few months and then shot herself when his fancy wandered. A noted Italian singer had loved him in vain. More than one beautiful woman of high birth and social position had yielded him her caresses. With a ruthlessness which promised nothing, asked for nothing but the pleasure of the moment, he had sated himself with soft arms and warm lips. But never had anything but his passing fancy been engaged. He would, he had sworn to himself, love no woman too much. Something having to do with the love of woman haunted him. It was related to that vague, terrifying dream of his; the dream he had had six years before in a desert city; the dream from which he had awakened conscious of latent forces stirring within himself. And before the dream there had been the book, the strange book over which he had pondered for years.

But he wasn't even sure of that. The book had vanished. And the dream was a recurring nightmare whose salient points ever eluded him. He was sure of only one thing: that he had been reborn in some miraculous fashion; that

the timid, weak, spiritless creature who had been Jim James had given place to a dynamic, forceful one; that he who had tramped the roads, had mucked it in ditches, had servilely cringed to others and washed dishes for the right to live, was now a man of destiny; that whatever he willed would be his. Wealth, power, position— they were his for the asking, the finding. He felt it, he knew it. An inner voice spoke to him and he harkened to its counsel. The discovery of the gold mine did not surprize him; the incident of the diamond mine only made him more sure of his rapidly developing powers. At times fear of himself and his uncanny ability assailed him. That was at first. Then he began to enjoy its use. Under the dynamic drive of his will he went up and up. Men were swayed by his personality. He became a financial power. Great men were proud of his nod of recognition. Only within himself was the saving grace of something of the old Jim James, hobo, dishwasher. He remembered that old Jim James as if he had been a well-beloved but not over-respected brother. He recalled the futile dreams and wild longings of that early Jim James for wealth and position. He used to lie on the roadside with his dirty bundle of bedding and watch the sleek motor-cars of the rich glide by. And what was it that old Jim James used to do? He used to build strange contrivances of sticks and stones and mumble queer sentences. Those sentences came from the book. But there was no book. Jim James shook his head. It was useless trying to separate fact from fiction. No wonder people in those days had thought him daft. But those days were past. He was a power now. Only he did not wish to love a woman. Book or no book, danger lay in loving a woman. He swore he would never love a woman. Then at a formal function in Paris he met Margaret, Countess of Walgrave, a great English beauty with the blood, so it was said, of the unhappy Stuarts in her veins, and all his resolutions were dust.

The countess was sitting in one of the chambers opening off the ballroom surrounded by a large circle of her admirers. She had just heard an incident regarding Jim James and his eccentricities of dress and conduct. An aristocrat by birth, a stickler for all the formality and dignity of her class, she gave her opinion of him in no uncertain terms.

"The man has proved himself a boor, an ignoramus, socially impossible."

"I believe," said one of the gentlemen, "that he is expected here tonight."

"Indeed! Then I trust no one presents him to me. I haven't any desire to make the acquaintance of such *canaille* no matter how wealthy. Why, it is common report that not so long ago the man was nothing but a navvy!"

"Yes, madam," said a quiet voice, "and a dish-washer, too. Surely you heard of the dish-washing?"

Jim James bowed in front of her, his slim figure correctly garbed in evening dress, continental style, his dark, vital eyes fixed on the countess' face.

"You know," he said in soft conversational tones, "I once blacked shoes a whole year in the city of Los Angeles for fifteen dollars a week and tips. Tips," he said dreamily, "nickels and dimes. How servile I could be for those tips!" He smiled reminiscently.

"And there was the time," he said, "when I was scullion in the kitchen of a California millionaire. But pardon me, I am forgetting my manners, talking of myself. Don't you dance, countess? Then may I have the pleasure—"

To no one's surprize more than her own the countess rose and put her small hand on his arm. They danced. The man danced divinely. Afterward they sat in a secluded part of the conservatory and talked. She didn't like Jim James, no; but neither was he the boor she had visualized him as being. Besides that, he fascinated her.

"So you think it unpardonable of me to dress now and then as I please? But consider: have I not the right to remind myself of the depths from which I have come? As for the rest, it is the humbler, weaker part of myself paying homage to the stronger— that is all." He dismissed the subject with a shrug of his shoulders. "But let us talk of something more pleasing, of yourself. Your hair in this light, how wonderful it looks; and your eyes...."

Jim James went home that evening (or rather early morning) definitely in love, and with a gnawing pain in some secret place of his body. For the first time since his metamorphosis he felt despondent. "I will never see that woman again," he vowed. The pain bothered him, and in his sleep he dreamed, a nightmarish dream. Or had it been a dream? He drank his late morning coffee. After that he felt better. What nonsense was this about love being dangerous? When and where had he picked up such a superstition? How beautiful the countess was! Danger or no danger, he loved her. The thought of her was like a heady drink. Oh damn that dream! His nerves aaually felt jumpy. But with an effort of his powerful will he calmed them.

That afternoon he called at the countess' Parisian home only to be informed she had hastily left Paris on the morning train, en route to England. For the countess herself had passed a disturbed night. The thought of Jim James haunted her. She was afraid of the man and the look of desire she had seen in his eyes. At the same time she felt herself swayed by his personality. Whatever this man wanted he would take. If he wanted her he would take her. He was ruthlessly strong and without mercy.

All this she sensed intuitively. But she sensed more than this. He would take, not by force or violence, but with her consent. That was the terrifying reality. Better not to see him again, to flee to safety. So she passed over to England on the afternon boat, little dreaming that the great white airplane

which flew over the steamer in midchannel was the private plane of Jim James bearing him to London.

The countess hadn't been in her town house twenty-four hours, when a slim man in English tweeds rang the entrance bell.

"My lady is in the morning room," said the butler. "If you will please wait until I announce you—"

But the visitor brushed past him with a pleasant smile.

"The morning room, yes. Right ahead? Do not bother, I can find it myself."

The countess looked up, startled, to see Jim James walk into the room. His coming coincided with certain thoughts of hers, for she had been thinking of him. He wasted no time on explanations. With both arms about her, his lips against her cheek (she was somewhat taller than himself), he said chidingly: "Margaret, Margaret, what is the use of running away from me?"

There was no use; she had probably always subconsciously been aware of the fact; yet she struggled in his imprisoning arms.

"You mustn't! It's impossible!"

He held her closer. "Say you love me."

"No— yes— oh, I don't know; I'm not sure..."

Six weeks later they were married.

It was a notable wedding. The groom's gift to the bride was a necklace of emeralds, each stone unrivalled for size and flawless splendor. The event revived all the dormant stories concerning Jim James. The tale of his miraculous rise to wealth and power was retold on two continents and in a thousand newspapers. Conservative estimates placed his fortune at well over a billion dollars. The richest man in the world, he was called, and Jim James alone knew for certain how true were the words.

v

AND NOW Jim James was at the very pinnacle of his stupendous career. Wealth, power, love, all were his. From the woman he loved he compelled love by the sheer force of his dynamic personality. But this compulsion of affection troubled the countess. She was not unhappy. She would have maintained— and with truth— that she loved her husband. But there were times when certain acts of his appalled her. Jim James could be uncouth in his manner. Sometimes his speech was far from grammatical. In his presence those things became negligible; but when she sat by herself she recalled them and they troubled her. As for Jim James, in spite of the fullness of his love, he was not happy.

Since the first night of meeting the countess he had been conscious of a dull gnawing pain in some secret part of his body. With the pain came a tendency to dream. Night after night he dreamed, and from those dreams wakened with the fearful impression that some unimaginable horror threatened the woman he loved. The great doctors he consulted could give him no relief. In a certain part of his body was found a curiously shaped scar. How had it gotten there? Jim James could not remember. He strove to recollect when he had incurred it. In vain. As for the dreams, he only knew that they were hideous, that they related to his past. Something sinister came when he slept and it whispered, whispered... what did it whisper? The name of his wife. Beads of perspiration stood out on his brow. It was madness! What in the name of God could threaten his wife? He stared at his face in the glass. Was he, the great Jim James, going mad? With an effort he schooled himself to be his quiet, assured self. But more frequently, when alone, the mask slipped and he gave himself over to fits of terrible depression.

At first Jim James did not understand the exact nature of what he feared. In an unostentatious way he surrounded his wife with a thousand safeguards. Trustworthy attendants went with her everywhere. Keepers with loaded rifles kept the walks and the woods of his country mansion under constant surveillance. His own secret-service men watched over his party when they travelled. Such precautions did not irk the countess nor surprize her. After all, Jim James, in his way, was a king, a powerful ruler, and she was his consort. Great personages always had armed retainers, and she was pleased with the sense of power and importance they conveyed. So things went for the first year of married life. Then happened that which helped to bring all the vague dreams and terrors of. months to a weird climax.

Toward the last of that year Jim James had grown afraid of things that glowed. He had to steel himself against the sight of flame in open fireplaces, of illumination in electric bulbs. They reminded him of a far-off spot he had once seen. Something terrible, menacing, lurked behind a red spot. Almost, at times, he could see it.

He went to bed that night in complete darkness. Even in his sleep he was conscious of the dull gnawing pain in his body. He dreamed— or was it a dream? He wakened from it as usual, sitting up in bed, his forehead beaded with perspiration. Through the window at the end of the room a yellow fragment of moon shone. Thank God, he had only been dreaming! What was it in the nightmare that had tendered him a book? But there was no book. He switched on the nightlight at the head of his bed and went to rise. Even as he did so he saw the thing which lay on the coverlet. It was a strange volume, yellow as if with time, and opened at a certain page. Like one petrified in a

half-rising position he glared at the book, and as he glared a few sentences of the finely printed and hieroglyphic-like characters leapt out at him like a blow.

For he whose body has been pierced in a secret spot by the horns of Om Nam, lo, from henceforth, is he an altar, a gateway from the past to the future, for the coming of the World Ancient.

(A half-witted tramp crouching by the roadside reading a book and making strange contrivances out of sticks and stones. A dish-washer brooding over a steaming sink and washing greasy dishes. A room in a cheap lodging-house and a man raising up a strange altar. Velvet blackness against a white, terrified face, and a shaking voice intoning, "O Liam Maroo....")

It all came back. The vague, terrifying dream was a dream no longer. And in return you shall pay ... the woman you love.

"Margaret! Margaret!" screamed the man.

What fiend had ever driven him to such a bargain? For wealth, for power, whispered a voice. But weighed in the scales against the life and safety of the woman he loved, how infinitesimal were wealth and power! Before a hair of her head were injured he would die!

Die... yes, that was the solution. Even the World Ancient would be powerless to make a dead man fulfil the dread pact. He was the altar, he was the gateway, and without him—

The gleaming steel paper-knife lay on the writing-desk. He picked it up. Its sinuous length shone. With steady hand he placed the pointed metal against his heart. One steady push, one powerful thrust.... But the blade curled; it was so much paper. With a curse he flung the useless weapon to the floor and sought for the revolver in a drawer of the dresser. That would do the trick. Thank God, Margaret slept soundly. Two heavy doors were dosed between him and her. The revolver was but a toy automatic in size but no less deadly at short range. Its discharge made little noise. The sound would not alarm her. He thought of the slim whiteness of her neck and the proud pale beauty of her face. The barrel of the revolver lay cold against the spot between his eyes. One pressure of the finger....

Perhaps twenty seconds elapsed after he had pulled the trigger before he became conscious of the fact that the weapon held pressed against his forehead was an impotent thing.

Again he pulled the trigger— again— a half-dozen times. Was that laughter he heard?

Suddenly he flung the revolver from him with a stifled cry. He understood. Death was denied him. Between him and self-destruction lay a power that forbade. He was lost, lost! Margaret was doomed! For a moment he sank on

the bed and surrendered to utter despair. Then summoning every last atom of his formidable strength he stood up to confront that which was coming.

For the room had darkened. Stygian gloom enwrapped him round. Even the moon had faded from the window, and the window gave no softer blackness against the prevailing gloom. Far off in the infinity of night grew a red spot, lurid, uncanny to behold. In the center of the red spot appeared a face, a terrible face, an unhuman face.

"I am here," said the face.

Jim James was on his knees, his hands outstretched.

"O Liam Maroo!" he cried, "mercy, mercy!"

The indescribable face regarded him without passion.

"The bargain was made, the pact sealed; I have come to demand of you the price."

"No, no!" cried Jim James wildly.

"The price," said the face inexorably.

Jim James threw himself on the floor.

"Sacrifice me," he cried. "My life, my body, they are yours!"

"Nay," said the face, "I did not bargain for your life. Wealth, power, the ability to sway men, create riches, all these have you had, and have found them good. In return you promised to sacrifice the heart, the brain..."

"But I did not understand," cried Jim James.

"Understand!" said the face, "When have you mortals ever understood? Gladly you paid what you had still to possess. Speak! did you not deliberately, of your own accord, weigh power and wealth against love—and choose wealth?"

"Yes, yes! But I did not know what love could be. I had never loved. In my arrogance I thought never to love. Now I know."

The words echoed through the room. Did a shade of pity flash across that unhuman face? The lurid light grew greater. Jim James stared fearfully as massive limbs wavered in a mist of fire, as great curling claws reached out. He was conscious of only one thing, that somehow, someway, he must save the woman he loved. He was shouting, screaming, "O Liam Maroo, is there no other way to pay the price?"

And the face looking down on him said, "There is a way."

Then he rose to his feet, courage pouring into his shivering body, and asked, "What is the way?"

"That your wealth and honors be stripped from you."

"They are yours."

"Nor is that all. That you sink into the depths from which you rose."

"You mean—"

"That you shall become again what you were when you sought my help. Men shall despise you. Again you shall know the bitter pangs of squalor and poverty. All your wealth and power, your palaces and servants, your mighty friends and sycophants, shall pass from you like a dream, be as if they had never been."

"And my wife?" murmured Jim James.

"Shall cease to love you. The thing in you that holds her now, that makes her real in your existence, will be gone for ever. Nothing will be left to you of the golden present— nothing but a few bitter memories. Think!" cried the face, "think well before you choose. Sacrifice the woman and all that you now have shall still be yours."

"All except the woman."

"But there are other women. Women as fair, women more complaisant."

"But not the woman."

"No, not the woman. But again I ask you to consider carefully. Sacrifice yourself, all that you are, and were the woman to meet you she would despise you. She will have another lover. While you are swining it in the ditch, she will be living for another, lost to you. Think! What is your choice?"

The face of Jim James looked agonizedly into the inscrutable, unhuman one of Liam Maroo. What! never to know the soft rapture of Margaret's arms again, never to feel the warm pressure of her lips? What! to live in poverty and want while she became the beloved of another? Never! All the burning jealousy of the man woke to life, struggled like serpents in his bosom, scored his face with debasing lines. Better to see her dead—dead!

"Ah," breathed Liam Maroo.

Jim James started as if from an evil spell. He saw the slim whiteness of his wife's neck and the pale proud beauty of her face. Then he straightened up against an oppressive weight and cried hoarsely but in a strong voice:

"All that I have of wealth and power, take them—only spare the woman!"

vi

IN THE city of Nogales, in the Mexican portion of that town which lies on the very borderline between Arizona and Sonora, there stands the American Saloon. Tourists from all over the United States visit this saloon. Within a few feet of the dry territory of Uncle Sam they can put a foot on a gleaming brass rail brought all the way from Forty-fifth Street, New York, and view themselves in a spotless expanse of mirror behind the bar. They can order small glasses of Scotch or big schooners of beer and listen to Big Pat Durfee bewail the carefree days when Manhattan was still wet and flowing over with licensed cheer. Also

they can sometimes observe the person who is responsible for the gleaming polish on the brass rail and the spotlessness of the vast expanse of mirror. This is a slender, dried-up wisp of a man weighing no more than a hundred and twenty pounds. His chin habitually shows a stubble of dirty-black beard and he is clad in frayed, shapeless trousers and a khaki shirt far from clean.

This individual goes his way, silently, furtively. Few notice him. If anyone does and makes inquiries, Big Pat answers, "Just an old bum that blew in. A bit cracked in the head, I guess. We call him Crazy Jim."

6: The Heads of Apex

Astounding Stories Oct 1931.

JUSTUS MILES was sitting on a bench in the park, down at the heels, hungry, desperate, when a gust of wind whirled a paper to his feet. It was the advertising section of the *New York Times*. Apathetically, he picked it up, knowing from the past weeks' experience that few or no jobs were being advertised. Then with a start he sat up, for in the center of the page, encased in a small box and printed in slightly larger type than the ordinary advertisement, he read the following words: "Wanted: Soldier of Fortune, young, healthy; must have good credentials. Apply 222 Reuter Place, between two and four." It was to-day's advertising section he was scanning, and the hour not yet one.

Reuter Place was some distance away, he knew, a good hour's walk on hard pavement and through considerable heat. But he had made forced marches in Sonora as badly shod and on even an emptier stomach. For Justus Miles, though he might not have looked it, was a bona fide soldier of fortune, stranded in New York. Five feet eight in height, he was, loose and rangy in build, and with deceptively mild blue eyes. He had fought through the World War, served under Kemal Pasha in Turkey, helped the Riffs in Morocco, filibustered in South America and handled a machine-gun for revolutionary forces in Mexico. Surely, he thought grimly, if anyone could fill the bill for a soldier of fortune it was himself.

222 Reuter Place proved to be a large residence in a shabby neighborhood. On the sidewalk, a queue of men was being held in line by a burly cop. The door of the house opened, and an individual, broad-shouldered and with flaming red hair, looked over the crowd. Instantly Justus Miles let out a yell, "Rusty! By God, Rusty!" and waved his hands.

"Hey, feller, who do you think you're shovin'?" growled a hard-looking fellow at the head of the line, but Justus Miles paid no attention to him. The man in the doorway also let out an excited yell.

"Well, well, if it isn't the Kid! Hey, Officer, let that fellow through: I want to speak to him."

With the door shut on the blasphemous mob, the two men wrung each other's hands. Ex-Sergeant Harry Ward, known to his intimates as "Rusty," led Justus Miles into a large office and shoved him into a chair.

"I didn't know you were in New York, kid. The last I saw of you was when we quit Sandino."

"And I never suspected that 222 Reuter Place would be you, Rusty. What's the lay, old man, and is there any chance to connect?"

"You bet your life there's a chance. Three hundred a month and found. But the boss has the final say-so, though I'm sure he'll take you on my recommendation."

He opened a door, led Justus Miles through an inner room, knocked at a far door and ushered him into the presence of a man who sat behind a roll-topped desk. There was something odd about this old man, and after a moment's inspection Justus Miles saw what it was. He was evidently a cripple, propped up in a strange wheelchair. He had an abnormally large and hairless head, and his body was muffled to the throat in a voluminous cloak, the folds of which fell over and enveloped most of the wheelchair itself. The face of this old gentleman— though the features were finely molded— was swarthy: its color was almost that of a negro— or an Egyptian. He regarded the two men with large and peculiarly colored eyes— eyes that probed them sharply.

"Well, Ward, what is it?"

"The man you advertised for, Mr. Solino."

Solino regarded Justus Miles critically.

"You have been a soldier of fortune?" he asked. He spoke English with the preciseness of an educated foreigner.

"Yes, sir. Rusty— that is, Mr. Ward knows my record."

"I was his sergeant in France, sir; saw fighting with him in Morocco, Turkey, Nicaragua—"

"You can vouch for him, then; his character, courage—"

"You couldn't get a better man, sir. If I had known he was in town I would have sent for him."

"Very well; that is sufficient. But Mr.— Miles did you say?— understands he is embarking on a dangerous adventure with grave chances of losing his life?"

"I have faced danger and risked my life before this," said Justus Miles quietly.

The other nodded. "Then that is all I am prepared to tell you at this time."

Justus Miles accompanied Ward to his room where the latter laid out for him a change of clothing. It was luxurious to splash in warm water and bath-salts after the enforced griminess of weeks. The clothes fitted him fairly well, the two men being of a size. Lounging in his friend's room after a substantial meal, and smoking a Turkish cigarette, he questioned Ward more closely.

"Who is the old fellow?"

"I don't know. He hired me through an advertisement and then set me to employing others."

"But surely you know where we are going?"

"Hardly more than you do. Solino did say there was a country, a city to be invaded. Whereabouts is a secret. I can't say I care for going it blind, but neither do I like starving to death. I was in about the same shape you were when you applied. Desperate."

Justus Miles stretched himself comfortably.

"A spiggoty by the looks of him," he said; "negro blood, no doubt. Well, fighting's my trade. I'd rather cash in fighting than sit on a park bench. I suppose the old boy will tell us more in good time, and until then we're sitting pretty, with good eats to be had; so why worry?"

And yet if Justus Miles had been able to look ahead he might not have talked so blithely.

DURING THE week that followed his employment, he saw nothing of Solino, though Ward met the old man for a few moments every day to receive his instructions. "It puzzles me," he confessed to Miles, "how the old chap lives. There's a private exit to the street from his rooms, but I could swear he never goes out. How could he in that wheelchair— no attendant. And yet he must. How would he get food?"

Justus Miles smiled lazily. "No mystery at all, Rusty. We're gone for hours at a time. What's to prevent him from phoning to have his meals brought in?"

"But I've questioned them at the restaurant and they say—"

"Good Lord!— is there only one restaurant in Manhattan?"

Yet Justus Miles himself could not help feeling there was something mysterious about Solino, but just how mysterious he did not realize—until, one evening, he stood with a half dozen of his fellow adventurers in a lonely spot on the Long Island coast and watched the darkness deepen around them. "We shall wait," said Solino presently, "until the moon comes up."

The moon rose at about nine o'clock, flooding the beach and the heaving expanse of water with a ghostly light. From the folds of Solino's cloak, close about his muffled throat, a peculiar ray of green light flashed out over the water. In answer, a green light flashed back, and presently, something low and black, like the body of a whale half submerged, stole towards the beach. Scarcely a ripple marked its progress, and the nose of it slid up on the sand. "Good Lord!" whispered Miles, grasping Ward by the arm: "it's a submarine!"

But the craft on which the surprised soldiers of fortune gazed was not an ordinary submarine. In the first place, there was no conning tower; and, in the second, from the blunt nose projected a narrow gangway bridging the few feet of water between the mysterious craft and the dry beach. But the men had little time to indulge in amazement.

"Quick," said Solino; "load those boxes onto the gangway. No need to carry them further." He himself wheeled his chair into the interior of the submarine, calling back, "Hurry, hurry!"

The adventurers accomplished the loading in a few minutes. "Now," came the voice of their employer, "stand on the gangway yourselves. Steady; don't move."

Under their feet they felt the gangway vibrate and withdraw from the land. For a moment they were in utter darkness; then a light flashed up and revealed a long, box-like room. The opening through which they had come had closed, leaving no sign of its existence.

In the center of the room stood a mechanism like a huge gyroscope, and a plunging piston, smooth and black, went up and down with frictionless ease. In front of what was evidently a control board sat a swarthy man with a large hairless head and peculiarly colored eyes. The adventurers stared in surprise, for this man, too, sat in a wheelchair, seemingly a cripple; but unlike Mr. Solino he wore no cloak, his body from the neck down being enclosed in a tubular metal container. The body must have been very small, and the legs amputated at the hips, since the container was not large and terminated on the seat of the peculiar wheel chair to which it seemed firmly attached.

Solino did not offer to introduce them to the man at the control board, who, aside from a quick look, paid them no attention. He ushered them ahead into another, though smaller cabin, and after indicating certain arrangements made for their comfort, withdrew. From the slight sway of the floor under their feet and the perceptible vibration of the craft, the adventurers knew they were under way.

"Well, this is a rum affair and no mistake about it," said one of them.

"A freak— a bloomin' freak," remarked another whose cockney accent proclaimed the Englishman.

"Yuh're shore right," said a lean Texan. "That hombre out there had no legs."

"Nor hands either."

Miles and Ward glanced at one another. The same thought was in both minds. Neither of them had ever seen Mr. Solino's hands. A rum affair all right!

Hours passed. Some of the men fell to gambling. At intervals they ate. Twice they turned in and slept. Then, after what seemed an interminable time, Solino summoned Miles and Ward to his presence in the control room. "It is time," he said, "that you should know more of the enterprise on which you have embarked. What I say, you can communicate to the other men. A year's salary for all of you lies to your credit at the Chase Bank of New York. And this money will not be your sole reward if you survive and serve faithfully."

"Thank you, sir," said Ward; "but now that we are well on our way to our destination, could you not tell us more about it? You have said something of a city, a country. Where is that country?"

"Down," was the astounding answer.

"Down?" echoed both men.

"Yes," said Solino slowly, "down. The gateway to that land is at the bottom of the ocean."

As the two men gaped at him, incredulous, an awful thing happened. With an appalling roar and a rending of steel and iron, the submarine halted abruptly in its headlong flight, reared upward at an acute angle and then fell forward with a tremendous crash. The adventurers were thrown violently against a steel bulkhead, and slumped down unconscious….

HOW LONG they lay there insensible they never knew. Justus Miles was the first to come to, and he found himself in Stygian blackness.

"Rusty!" he called, feeling terribly sick and giddy. Only silence answered him.

"Good God!" he thought, "what has happened?"

His hand went out and recoiled from something soft and sticky. Gingerly he sat up. There was a lump on his head. His body felt bruised and sore but it was evidently sound. He recollected the small but powerful flashlight in his pocket, and drew it forth and pressed the button. A reassuring pencil of light pierced through the gloom. Even as it did so, someone groaned, and Ward's voice uttered his name.

"Is that you, Kid?"

"It's me, all right."

"You ain't hurt?"

"Nothing to speak of. How about you?"

"O. K., I guess. An awful headache."

"Can you stand up?"

"Yes."

Ward's face appeared in the ray of light, pale and blood-streaked.

"I wonder what happened."

"It sounded like a collision."

They stared at one another with fearful eyes. A collision while underseas in a submarine is a serious matter.

"Where's Solino?"

Justus Miles ran the beam of his torch this way and that, and saw that the room was in a fearful confusion. The gyroscopic mechanism had broken from its fastenings and rolled forward. Somewhere beneath its crushing weight lay

the control board and the swarthy operator. Then they saw Solino, still in his overturned wheelchair, the cloak drawn tightly about himself and it; but the top of his head was crushed in like an eggshell. Justus Miles had touched that head when he stretched out his hand in the darkness.

He and Ward had been saved from death as by a miracle. Over their heads the great piston had hurtled, killing Solino and tearing through the steel partition into the chamber beyond, visiting it with death and destruction. One hasty examination of that place was enough. The men in there were dead.

Sick with horror, the two survivors faced the stark reality of their terrible plight. Trapped in an underwater craft, they saw themselves doomed to perish even more miserably than their companions. As the horrible thought sank home, a cool breath of air, suggesting the smell of stagnant salt water, blew through an opening created by the crushing of the plates in the vessel's hull— an opening larger than the body of a man. Miles and Ward stared at it with puzzled eyes. With such a hole in her hull, the boat should have been admitting water and not air. However, they approached the gap and examined it with their torches.

"Here goes," Ward said after a moment's hesitation, and clambered through the opening, followed by his friend. When they were able to make out their surroundings, they saw that they were in a vast tunnel or cavern, the extent of which was shrouded in darkness. How the submarine had left the ocean and penetrated to this cavern it was impossible to say; but evidently it had come so far over a shining rail, a break in which had caused the disaster. The cavern or tunnel was paved with disjointed blocks of stone which once might have been smooth and even, but which now were disarranged by time and slimy with dampness and seagrowths. In the clammy air Miles involuntarily shuddered. "Good Lord, Rusty, we're certainly up against it! The only fellow who could tell us our whereabouts is dead!"

Ward's jaw tightened. "That rail leads somewhere: it's our only hope. But first let us get our guns and some food."

They were fortunate enough to discover several thermos bottles unbroken. Hot coffee revived their fainting spirits. Treating their bruises and cuts as well as they could, they left the submarine or car— it seemed to have been convertible for use either in water or on rail— and trudged ahead.

Beyond the break that had caused the wreck, the rail stretched away into illimitable blackness. Over rough stones, stumbling into shallow pools of water, the light of their torches serving but faintly to show the depressing surroundings, the two men plunged. Neither of them was without fear, but both possessed the enduring courage of men habituated to facing danger and sudden death without losing control of their faculties.

Time passed, but they had no means of telling how much, since their wrist watches no longer functioned. But after a while they noticed that the grade was upward and the going easier. At the same moment, Ward called attention to the fact that, even without electric torches, it was possible to see. All around the two Americans grew a strange light— a weird, phosphorescent glow, revealing far walls and massive pillars.

Now they could see that they were in a vast chamber, undoubtedly the work of human hands; a room awe-inspiring to behold, and even more than awe-inspiring in the reflections it forced upon their minds. Passages radiated on either hand to mysterious depths, and great bulks loomed in the spectral light. Justus Miles gave a low cry of amazement when a closer investigation revealed those bulks to be the wrecks of mighty and intricate machines, the use of which it was vain to conjecture. He looked at Ward.

"Solino spoke of a city down in the ocean. Can this be it?"

Ward shook his head. "Everything here is old, abandoned. Look— what is that?"

The figure of a giant creature, carved either from stone or marble and encrusted with phosphorous, stood lowering in their path. It was that of a winged beast with a human head. Its features were negroid in character; and so malignant was the expression of the staring face, so lifelike the execution of the whole statue, that a chill of fear ran through their veins. It was in Ward's mind that this gigantic carving was akin to the ones he had seen in Egypt, and as old, if not older.

Beyond the statue the rail curved and the grade leveled; and, rounding the bend, they were amazed to come upon a sort of "yard" where the rail stopped. In that enclosure, on several sidings, were submarine cars similar to the wrecked one they had abandoned. But that was not the sight which brought them to a breathless halt. Beyond the sidings stood what appeared to be a small building of gleaming crystal.

After a moment of breathless wonder they cautiously approached the bizarre structure. No dampness or phosphorus impaired the clarity of its walls. The material composing them felt vibrantly warm to the touch. It was not glass, yet it was possible to look without difficulty into the interior of the building, which appeared to be one large room containing nothing but a central device not unlike the filaments of an electric bulb. In fact, the whole building, viewed from the outside, reminded the two adventurers of a giant light globe. The filaments radiated a steady and somehow exhilarating light. The door—they knew it was a door because an edging of dark metal outlined its frame—gave admittance to the room.

"Shall we?" questioned Miles; and Ward answered doubtfully, "I don't know. Perhaps…."

But at last they turned the golden knob, felt the door give to their pressure, and stepped through the entrance into the soft radiance of the interior. Unthinkingly, Ward released his hold on the knob and the door swung shut behind them. Instantly there was a flash of light, and they were oppressed by a feeling of nausea: and then, out of a momentary pit of blackness, they emerged to find that the room of crystal had oddly changed its proportions and opaqueness.

"Quick!" cried Ward; "let us get out of this place." Both men found the door and staggered forth.

Then, at sight of what they saw, they stood rooted to the spot in sheer amazement. The gloomy tunnel and the sidings of submarine cars had vanished, and they were standing in a vast hall, an utterly strange and magnificent hall, staring up into the face of a creature crudely human and colored green!

The green man was almost of heroic proportions; he was clad in but a breech-clout, and was so broad as to appear squat in stature. He carried a short club, and appeared almost as dumbfounded as the two Americans. A moment he regarded them, then, with a ferocious snarl of rage, he hurled himself upon the startled Ward and half clubbed, half pushed him to the floor. Recovering from his momentary inaction and realizing the danger in which his friend stood, Miles shouted and leaped upon the green man's back, fastening his sinewy fingers about the giant's throat.

But the latter was possessed of incredible strength, and, straightening up, he shook off Miles as a bear might shake off an attacking dog, and threw him heavily to the floor. Then the green giant whirled up his club, and it would have gone hardly with Miles if Ward had not remembered his automatic and fired in the nick of time. As if poleaxed, the green man fell; and both the adventurers recovered their feet.

"Look out!" shouted Ward.

Through a wide entrance came charging a dozen greenish giants. Miles fired both his pistols. The leader of the greenish men paused in mid-leap, clawing at his stomach.

"This way, Kid!" yelled Ward; "this way!"

Taking advantage of the confusion in the ranks of the attackers, the two sprang to where an exit in the far wall promised an avenue of escape. Down a broad passage they rushed. Seemingly the passage ended in a cul-de-sac, for a wall of blank whiteness barred further progress. Behind them came charging the greenish giants uttering appalling cries. Desperately the two Americans

turned, resolved to sell their lives as dearly as possible; but at that moment happened a sheer miracle. The blank wall divided, revealing a narrow crevice through which they sprang. Noiselessly the crevice closed behind them, shutting out the green pursuers, and a voice said— a voice in precise but strangely accented English:

"We have been expecting you, gentlemen, but— where is Solino?"

NEVER WOULD Miles and Ward forget the amazement of that moment. They were in a place which looked not unlike a huge laboratory. Then they saw it was a lofty room containing a variety of strange mechanisms. But it was not on these their eyes focussed. Confronting them in odd wheelchairs, with hairless heads projecting from tubular containers like the one they had seen encasing the man at the control board of the submarines, were all of half a hundred crippled men!

"Good Lord!" exclaimed Miles, "I must be seeing things!"

"Where is Solino?" demanded the voice in strangely accented English.

Ward saw that the question came from an individual in a wheelchair a few feet in front of them.

"Solino is dead," he answered.

"Dead?" A ripple of sound came from the oddly seated men.

"Yes, the submarine car was wrecked in the tunnel, and everyone aboard was killed save us two."

The hairless men looked at one another. "This is Spiro's work," said one of them, still in English; and another said, "Yes, Spiro has done this."

Miles and Ward were recovering somewhat from their initial astonishment. "What place is this?" asked the former.

"This is Apex— or, rather, the Palace of the Heads in Apex."

The Palace of the Heads! The two Americans tried to control their bewilderment.

"Pardon us if we don't understand. Everything is so strange. First the submarine was wrecked. Then we entered the crystal room and the tunnel vanished. We can't understand how this place can be at the bottom of the Atlantic."

"It isn't at the bottom of the Atlantic."

"Not at the bottom? Then where?"

"It isn't," said the voice slowly, "in your world at all."

The import of what was said did not at first penetrate the minds of the Americans. "Not in our world?" they echoed stupidly.

"Come," said the crippled man smiling inscrutably, "you are tired and hungry. Later I shall explain more." His strangely colored eyes bored into their

own. "Sleep," said his voice softly, imperatively; and though they fought against the command with all the strength of their wills, heaviness weighted down their eyelids and they slept.

From dreamless sleep they awakened to find that fatigue had miraculously vanished, that their wounds were healed and their bodies and clothes were free of slime and filth. All but one of the crippled men— for so in their own minds they termed the odd individuals— had gone away. That one was the man who had first addressed them.

"Do not be alarmed," he said. "In our own fashion we have given you food and rest and attended to your comfort."

Ward smiled, though a trifle uncertainly. "We are not easily frightened," he replied.

"So! That is good. But now listen: my name is Zoro and I am Chief of the Heads of Apex. Ages ago we Heads lived on a continent of your Earth now known to scholars as Atlantis. When Atlantis sank below the waves—in your sacred book that tragedy is known as the Flood— all but a scattered few of its people perished. I and my companions were among the survivors."

The Americans stared at him unbelievingly. "But that was a hundred thousand years ago!" exclaimed Ward.

"Three hundred thousand," corrected Zoro.

They stared at him dumbly.

"Yes," said Zoro; "it sounds incredible to your ears, but it is true. Mighty as is the industrial civilization of your day, that of Atlantis was mightier. Of course, the country wasn't then called Atlantis; its real name was A-zooma. A-zooma ruled the world. Its ships with sails of copper and engines of brass covered the many seas which now are lands. Its airships clove the air with a safety and speed your own have still to attain. The wealth of the world poured into A-zooma, and its rulers waxed vain-glorious and proud. Time after time the enslaved masses of A-zooma and of conquered countries rose in great rebellions. Then against them marched the "iron baylas" breathing death and destruction, and from the air mighty ships poured down the yellow fog…."

Zoro paused, but presently went on: "So we ruled— for ten thousand years; until the scientists who begot those engines of destruction became afraid, because the serfs themselves began to build secret laboratories. We of the priesthood of science saw the inevitable disaster. Long ago we had put off our bodies—"

Zoro smiled at the Americans' amazement. "No," he said, "I am not a cripple in a wheelchair. This tubular container holds no fleshly body. Inside of it is a mechanical heart which pumps artificial blood— blood purified by a process I will not describe— through my head. It also contains certain inner

devices under my mental control, devices that take the place of human hands and feet. Only by accident or through lack of certain essentials can I die."

His listeners stared at him in awe. "You mean," faltered Miles, "that save for your head you are all— machine?"

"Practically, yes. We priest-scientists of the Inner Mystery prolonged life in such fashion. I was three thousand years old when— But enough! I will not weary you with a recital of how the slaves burrowed the bowels of A-zooma and of how the masters loosed against them the forces of the atom. Suffice it to say that on an island we built our vast system of buildings— or tunnel as you choose to call it— and sealed them away from the outside world, entrance being made by submarines through automatically controlled locks.

"At about this time our experiments opened up another realm of existence, manifesting at a vibratory rate above that of earth. To this new realm we brought workers who built the City of Apex and the palace you are in. But, unfortunately, we brought with us no weapons of offense, and in the new world we had neither the material nor the delicate mechanisms and factories to reproduce them. However, for countless ages there was no rebellion on the part of the workers who, even in A-zooma, had worshipped us as gods. They were born, grew old and died, but we abode forever. Besides, in the City of Apex they were freer than they had ever been before, merely having to furnish our laboratories with certain raw materials and the wherewithal to sustain the blood supply on which our lives depend. But, of late, they have made common cause with the original inhabitants of this plane, the green men—"

The green men! As if the words were a signal, a dreadful thing happened. Out of a far shadow leaped a lean and hideous monster. To Miles' startled eyes it seemed to grow as it leaped. Thin, unbelievably thin it was, yet swelling at the head. From between two goggle-eyes writhed a rope-like trunk. Twelve feet in the air its head towered over Zoro. "Look out!" screamed the American.

Zoro's chair seemed to jump. Too late! Around the tubular container wrapped the snake-like trunk, plucking the wheelchair and its occupant from the floor and dangling them high in air. "Shoot!" cried Zoro.

Miles shot. His bullet ploughed through the unbelievably thin body and ricochetted from a pillar beyond. Ward fired with better effect. One of the goggle eyes spattered like glass. Under a fusillade of bullets the monster wilted, giving expression to a weird, shrill cry. Zoro dangled head downwards. To drop from such a height on his skull would probably be fatal.

But the monster did not drop him. Instead, in its death agony, its grip tightened, and the Americans witnessed an incredible sight. Before their very eyes the monster began rapidly to shrink. Its tenuous body telescoped

together, becoming thinner and thinner in the process, until on the floor there lay the lifeless body of a snake-like creature not more than six inches in length!

"Good Lord!" breathed Miles.

Zoro who had escaped unscathed from his perilous plight, regarded it with his peculiarly colored eyes.

"It is a tah-a-la," he said, "and must have entered the room at the same time you did. The green men often capture and train them for hunting. When about to seize their prey their bodies have the power of enormously stretching." Outwardly he seemed unaffected by the danger safely passed and waved away several of his fellows who had wheeled to the spot attracted by the noise of the pistols.

The Americans were more shaken.

"Perhaps," said Ward, "there is danger of—"

"None," replied Zoro. "I know there are no other tah-a-las inside these rooms, since it is the nature of these beasts to rush to each other's aid when they scream. And as for outside attacks, the laboratories are insulated against any the insurgent workers can make. Their weapons are poor—the green men use but clubs. No, it is not their attacks we fear but their refusal to furnish us with supplies. They worshipped us as gods, and the giving of supplies was long a religious rite. But now they doubt our divinity, and, since they no longer listen to or obey our decrees, we have no means of punishing them. Spiro is responsible for this."

"Spiro?" questioned the two men.

"He whom we raised to the dignity of godhead on the accidental death of Bah-koo, causing a deep sleep to fall upon him in the temple and grafting his head upon the mechanical body left by the latter. Twice before we had done this with citizens of Apex, and how were we to know that Spiro would resent it? True, he was in love with Ah-eeda, but the physical passions of men die with the organisms that give them birth. For three years he dwelt with us in the laboratories, learning the wisdom of the Heads, and then,"— Zoro's face became forbidding— "he denounced us to the people. Though there was more or less discontent, they would never have dared defy us save for him. He told them that our curses could do no harm, that we were merely the heads of men like himself and would die if they refused to give us the wherewithal to renew blood.

"But this refusal of theirs is an evil thing," he cried, looking at the Americans with his strangely colored eyes. "It violates the custom of ages, and strikes at the very roots of our existence. So we held council and sent two of our number to Earth after men and weapons to enforce our demands. For years we had watched Earth, seen its myriad civilizations rise and fall, studied

the coming of America to power and importance. So it was to America that Solino went, by way of the tunnel that still exists under the Atlantic—"

"And hired us," interrupted Ward, "and brought us to the tunnel in the submarine-car where we—"

"Stepped into the crystal chamber," finished Zoro. "That chamber is a re-vibrating device of certain rays and chemicals. The shutting of the door closed the switches and hurled your bodies to where a receiving-station on this plane integrated them again."

So they were not at the bottom of the ocean. They were— stupendous thought— living in a new world of matter!

"Spiro suspected our plans," continued Zoro. "He isolated us in our laboratories, and, by means of a crystal tube, went through to the tunnel, tore up a section of track, and wrecked the submarine-car. But his act was only partially successful. You two escaped death; you are here; you are ready to keep faith and fight in our service."

"We are ready to fight," assented Miles and Ward. The situation was certainly an unusual one, and one they did not clearly understand; but theirs was the simple code of the mercenary soldier— they would fight for whoever hired them, and be loyal as long as their wages were paid.

"Then there is no time to lose," exclaimed Zoro. "Already our blood grows thin. You must go back to the wrecked submarine and retrieve your weapons."

"But how?"

"There is a sending tube in the next compartment."

They followed Zoro through lofty rooms filled with amber light until they came to one wherein were assembled the rest of the Heads. Zoro spoke to them swiftly in a strange, flowing tongue. Then he conducted the two Americans to a crystal chamber at the end of the room and bade them enter it. The vibrant light caressed their limbs.

"When I close this door," he said, "you will find yourselves back in the tunnel. Board one of the submarine-cars on the siding and proceed to the wreck." He gave them detailed instructions how to operate the car. "Then get your weapons and return. Do you understand?"

They nodded.

"The workers possess no arms the equal of machine-guns and bombs. They will be at your mercy. Remember that you are fighting for our lives and that, if you save them, your reward will be great. Fear nothing."

The door closed. After a moment there was a blinding flash, a moment of swooning darkness, and then they were staring through transparent walls into the phosphorescent gloom of the underseas crypt. Suddenly, what they had

recently undergone seemed the product of an illusion, a dream. Ward shook himself vigorously.

"I guess it was real enough," he said. "Let us see if the car works."

They ran out to the wreck and returned without trouble. The machine-gun was mounted for action and the gas-bombs slung over their shoulders in convenient bags.

"All right," said Miles tensely, "let us go."

Again they entered the crystal chamber; again there was the flash of light and the sensation of falling into darkest space. Then, in a moment it seemed, they were stepping into the hall from which they had fled pursued by the green men— only for the second time, to be confronted by a crowd of hostile giants.

"Don't fire, Kid!" yelled Ward. "It's no use to kill them uselessly. Give them the bombs!"

Disconcerted by the attack of tear-gas, the green men broke and fled. "After them," panted Ward: "we've got them on the run!"

Thrilling to the lust of battle, the two Americans emerged into an open square. They had little time to note the odd buildings and strange statues. Coming towards them with leveled weapons, the nature of which they did not know, was a band of short men— that is, short in comparison with the greenish giants. Behind this company appeared still another, and another. Tear-gas was useless to stop their onward rush.

"All right," yelled Miles, "it's lead they want!"

The machine-gun spat a hail of bullets. Before the first withering blast the swarthy men recoiled in confusion. Then a second volley scattered them like chaff. Miles and Ward were conscious of no pity for the dead and wounded lying on the pavement of yellow stone. This was their profession, the stern business of which they were masters. In France they had seen worse sights, and in Nicaragua and Mexico. They swept destructively out of the square and into a long tree-lined avenue. This might be another world or dimension but its trees looked not unlike those of tropical America.

In a short while the radiating streets were cleared of crowds and the cries of the mob died away. Miles and Ward paused in the shadow of an overhanging wall and wiped their faces. "That was quick work, all right," said Ward; and, even as he said it, the wall seemed to fall upon their unprotected heads and crush them into unconsciousness….

OUT OF A SICK DARKNESS they came. At first they thought they were confronting Zoro. Then, as the mists of unconsciousness cleared from aching heads, they perceived that they were in a vast hall crowded with swarthy men

in short tunics, and with greenish giants wearing nothing but breech-clouts and swinging short clubs. The fierce eyes of the greenish giants were upon them, and the vengeful ones of the swarthy men. But the desire of both to rend and tear was held in check by the dominant head emerging from a tubular container mounted upon a wheelchair. The Americans stared. This was not the head of Zoro. No!

"The head of Spiro," thought Miles and Ward with sinking hearts.

They had fallen into the power of the leader of the insurgent workers!

Spiro— for it was indeed he— regarded them with pitiless eyes. His English was slower and not as fluent as that of Zoro, and his words harder to understand.

"You Americans, beings of another world, have come here at the bidding of the Heads to slay and kill for gold."

He paused. "I who for three years studied your country, learned its language, history, did not believe men of your race could be so vile."

He paused again, and Ward broke out hotly, "It is true that we came here to fight for gold, but who are you to speak of vileness? Have you not turned on the Heads, your benefactors, now your brothers, who raised you to their height? Are you not leading a revolt of the workers which would deny them the means of sustaining life? Are you not seeking to perpetrate— murder?"

Spiro regarded him slowly. "Is it possible you are in ignorance of what those means are? Listen, then, while I tell you the hideous truth. Since the dawn of our history, until the present moment, the Heads have maintained their lives by draining blood from the veins of thousands of Apexans yearly!"

The Americans' faces whitened. "What do you mean?" breathed Ward.

"I mean that the artificial blood pumped by mechanical hearts through the brains of the Heads— yes, and that is now being pumped through my own!" cried Spiro bitterly— "is manufactured from human blood. Human blood is the basis of it. And to get that blood every Apexan must yield his quota in the temple. Slowly but surely this practice is sapping the vitality of the race. But though the Apexans realized this they were afraid to speak against the custom. For the Heads were worshipped as gods; and when the gods spoke, blasphemers died— horribly."

Miles and Ward shuddered.

"Even I," went on Spiro, "denounced blasphemers and thought it holy that each should yield a little of his blood to the Almighty Ones. Then I woke from darkness to find myself— a Head. At first I could not understand, for I was in love with Ah-eeda— and can a machine mate? But it is true that love is largely desire, and desire of the body. With the death of the body, desire died; and it may be that pride and ambition took its place. But, for all that, there were

moments when I remembered my lost manhood and dreamed of Ah-eeda. Yes, though the laboratory of the Heads revealed wonders of which I had never dreamed, though I looked into your world and studied its languages and history, though I was worshipped as a god and endless life stretched ahead of me— nevertheless, I could see that the strength of my race was being sapped, its virility lost!"

His voice broke. "In the face of such knowledge what were immortality and power? Could they compensate for one hour of life and love as humanity lived it? So I brooded. Then one day in the temple I looked into the face of a girl about to be bled and recognized Ah-eeda. In that moment, hatred of the fiends posing as gods and draining the vitality of deluded worshippers, crystallized and drove me to action. So it was I who denounced the Heads, aroused the people!"

Spiro's voice broke; died.

Miles and Ward stared at him, horrified; and after a while Miles exclaimed, "We never suspected! We would never have fought to maintain such a thing had we known!"

"Nonetheless," said Spiro inflexibly, "you fought for it, and many people died and more are afraid. Superstition is a hard thing to kill. Already there are those who murmur that truly the Heads are gods and have called up demons from the underworld, as they threatened they would, to smite them with thunder until once more they yield blood in the temple. But I know that without blood the Heads must die miserably and the people be freed from their vampire existence. It is true that I too shall die, but that is nothing. I die gladly. Therefore, to keep the people from sacrificing blood, to show them that you are mortal and the Heads powerless to save the demons they have raised, you must be slain in front of the great palace.

"Yes; you, too, must die for the people!"

BOUND AND HELPLESS, lying on their backs and staring into the gloom of the small chamber into which they had been thrown, Miles and Ward had time to ponder their desperate situation. Spiro was delaying their death until the workers of Apex would have time to gather and witness it. At first they had struggled to loosen their bonds, but such efforts served only to tighten them. Then they had tried the trick of rolling together so that the fingers of one might endeavor to undo the knots securing the other. On a memorable occasion in Turkey they had freed themselves in this manner. But the attempts proved fruitless now. The floor of the chamber was smooth, nor could they find any rough projection on which to saw the cords.

Exhausted, they finally desisted. The same thought was in both minds: Were they doomed to die in this strange world, fated never to see Earth again? Well, a soldier of fortune must expect to meet with reverses. Still, it was a tough break.

After a long silence Ward said, "How were we to know that the heads lived on the blood of the people?"

"Would it have made any difference if we had known?" asked Miles.

"Perhaps not." Ward tried to shrug his shoulders. "After all, we have fought to maintain systems not much better. There is little difference, save in degree, between draining the life-blood of a race and robbing it of the fruits of its labor."

"But sometimes we fought to liberate people," protested Miles.

"Yes, I like to think of that. It's good to have something to our credit when we cash in. And it looks," he said pessimistically, "as if our time to do so has come."

They ceased talking. Time passed cheerlessly. Finally both of them fell into a heavy slumber from which they were aroused by the sudden flashing in their eyes of a bright light, bright only in comparison with the former intense darkness.

"What's that!" cried Ward, startled.

"S-sh," said a soft voice warningly, and when their eyes became accustomed to the illumination, they were amazed to perceive the slender form of a young girl carrying a torch. She was marvelously lovely to look at, with her blue-black hair brushed straight back from a low, broad forehead and her smooth skin as dark as that of an Egyptian. Nor was she dressed unlike pictures Miles had seen of people of ancient Egypt. The embroidered plates covering the small breasts shone and glittered; bracelets and bangles flashed on bare arms and shapely ankles; while from the waist to below the knees was a skirt of rich material. On the small feet were sandals of intricate design. Besides the torch, the girl carried a slim, gleaming knife, and for a moment the adventurers were guilty of imagining she had come to slay them where they lay. But her manner quickly dispelled their fear. Sinking on her knees beside them, she said, "Do not be afraid; Ah-eeda will not harm you."

So this was Ah-eeda, the girl of whom Spiro had spoken. Miles and Ward devoured her loveliness with their eyes; her coming flooded their bosoms with renewed hope. She continued speaking. Her English was not at all fluent, and she was often compelled to make it clear with expressions in her own tongue and with explanatory gestures. But to Miles and Ward, who knew nothing of temple training, her speaking English at all was a miracle.

"Is it true that you are men from another world?"

"Yes."

"And you came to make the people give their blood to the Heads?"

"No, that is not true. We were in ignorance of what it was we fought for. Had we known the truth we would have refused to fight for the Heads."

"Then, if I were to set you free, you would go back to your own world and not fight my people any more?"

They nodded vigorously.

"Oh, I am so glad," exclaimed the girl; "I did not want to see you die!" She looked at Miles as she spoke. "I saw you before Spiro this afternoon. Poor Spiro!" she murmured as she cut their bonds. It was some time before circulation was restored to their limbs.

Miles asked anxiously, "How many guards are there at the door?"

"Twelve," said the girl; "but they are playing wong-wo in the room outside and drinking soola." She pantomimed her meaning. "I came here through a secret passage beyond," she indicated by a wave of her hand. "Now that you can walk, let us hurry." Shyly she took Miles' hand. The warm clasp of her fingers made the blood course faster in his veins.

Through a long passage they glided to another room. There were several confusing turns and dark hallways, and twice they had to cower in shadowy corners while Ah-eeda boldly advanced and held converse with occasional persons encountered, though for the most part the way was silent and deserted. At last they came to a low door opening on a narrow street and the girl put out her torch.

"To return to our own world we must first reach the Palace of the Heads," said Ward. The girl nodded. "I will guide you there. But we must hurry: the workers will soon be gathered."

Never were Miles and Ward to forget that breathless flight. The girl led them through narrow and devious byways over which dark buildings leaned, evidently avoiding the more direct and open thoroughfares. It seemed as if they were to escape without hindrance when, suddenly, out of a dimly lighted doorway, lurched the gigantic figure of a green man carrying a flare. This flare threw the figures of the fugitives into relief.

"Ho!" roared the green man, and came at them like a furious bull. It seemed characteristic of his kind to attack without parley. The torch dropped as he came. There was no resisting that mighty bulk. Unarmed, and with scant room to move backward, the two Americans went down; and that would have been the end of the battle if Ah-eeda, who had shrunk to one side out of the way of the combatants, had not snatched up the still flaming torch and held it against the naked back of the greenish giant. With a scream of anguish the

latter ceased throttling the Americans, clapped his hands to his scorched back and rolled clear of them.

Instantly they staggered to their feet and fled down the roadway after the light-footed Ah-eeda. Behind them the screams of the green man made the night hideous.

"Damn him!" panted Ward; "he'll have the whole town on our heels!" Providentially, at that moment the road debouched into the great square. This they crossed at a run, and so, for the last time, entered the Palace of the Heads. Its wide halls and chambers were practically deserted.

Past the crystal chamber where they had first materialized into this strange world they dashed, and through the far door and down the corridor to the blank wall. Already in the rear could be heard the sound of pursuit, the rising clamor of the mob. Ward hammered on the wall with both fists.

"Zoro! Zoro! let us in!"

Now the first of the mob had entered the corridor.

"Zoro! Zoro!"

Noiselessly, and just in time, the wall parted and they sprang through, Miles half carrying the slender form of Ah-eeda. The wall closed behind them, obliterating the fierce cries and footbeats of their pursuers.

In front of them was Zoro, his hairless head projecting from the tubular container. Ah-eeda shrank fearfully into Miles' embrace. All the other Heads were ranged back of Zoro, but there was something odd about them. The massive craniums lolled loosely to one side or another and the curiously colored eyes were glazed or filmed. Zoro held his head erect, but only with an effort, and his features were drawn and ghastly looking.

"Yes," he said in a feeble voice, "the Heads are dying. You need not tell me that you have failed. In the end force always fails. No longer will the veins of the people yield their blood to us, and without their blood we cannot live. Soon three hundred thousand years of intelligence will be no more." His voice faltered.

Miles and Ward had learned to feel nothing but horror and detestation of the Heads, but now in the face of their tragic end, hearing the dying words of Zoro, awe and sympathy struggled with other emotions in their hearts. These mighty intellects had lived before the days of the flood; their eyes filming now in death had seen the ancient empires of Earth rise and fall…. Sumeria, Babylon…. Stupendous thought; and yet in the face of death a hundred thousand years of life was of no more importance than that of a day. Suddenly Ward sprang forward and shook the fainting Head.

"Zoro! Zoro! what of us? We served you faithfully and would now return to Earth."

Visibly Zoro made a great effort to reply.

"Go to the crystal tube in the laboratory beyond," he said at last. "It still works. I have told you how to run the car. Mend the tracks. The locks open automatically and let the car into the ocean when it strikes the switch. Your reward is in…."

The words died away. Then, with a sudden influx of strength, the hairless head straightened, the strangely colored eyes cleared, and in a loud voice Zoro called out something in an unknown tongue and then collapsed.

Out of that chamber of death the Americans fled, suddenly afraid of its weird occupants. In time the workers of Apex would break into that strange laboratory and find the vampires of the ages dead. And in a very short time Spiro himself would die— Spiro the avenger.

At the crystal tube Miles paused.

"Ah-eeda," he said softly, "we return to Earth, but I shall never forget you, never!"

A moment he hesitated, and then bent and kissed her swiftly. Instantly she was in his arms, clinging to him passionately.

"I too," she cried; "I too!"

"She means," said Ward, "that she wants to go back with us. What do you say?"

"God knows I am tempted to take her," said Miles; "but would it be right? What does she know of Earth?"

"Nothing," said Ward; "but I believe she loves you. And have you thought that after helping us to escape she may not be safe among her own people?"

Miles bowed his head. "Very well," he said; "so be it. I swear to make her happy."

So there were three of them who entered the crystal tube.

7: The Superman of Dr Jukes

Wonder Stories Nov 1931

1: Human Experiment

HE WAS slim and of medium height, with the phenomenon of cold gray eyes in a dark face and under a thatch of black hair. His father had been an Italian immigrant and his mother a descendant of "dark Irish," those sons and daughters of old Spanish blood— the blood of the crew of the great Armada that Philip sent out in pride and pomp to subdue Elizabethan England, that Drake and Frobisher scattered, and that storms cast away on the inhospitable shores of Scotland, and on the rock coast of the Green Isle.

Chicago had bred him, and in the Windy City he was known as "Killer Mike." He did not look the killer, but in his case looks were deceiving. As a matter of fact, he was as deadly as a rattlesnake. but he struck only in the matter of business and never for the mere love of slaughter. Young, he was under thirty, and personable, with the smatterings of a fair education. It was only when the "Big Shot." whose bodyguard he was, tried to put him on "the spot," that he left Chicago hurriedly. The Big Shot held organized gangsterism in the hollow of his hand and to attempt. openly, to live and function without his permission and protection was suicidal.

So the Killer had fled, conscious that the long arm of his erstwhile chief "was reaching out to slay. East to Boston, and from Boston by steamer to Halifax. Here he breathed easily for a moment. But one night a shot stabbed at him through the dark so he staked aboard a train for Montreal. From Montreal he swung across the border to Detroit, and from Detroit zigzagged west to Arizona, losing himself in the vast armies of unemployed who rode freights. By this time his money was gone, his sleekness, and he wore frowsy overalls and a jumper. Lolling on the grass by the Fourth Street subway in Tucson, not knowing what moment he might be bagged by a policeman, an elderly gentleman with a large protruding nose accosted him.

"I suppose work is pretty hard to get these days," he remarked.

"Yes, said the killer. He was properly suspicious of all strangers, but a cursory inspection served to show that here was no likely henchman of the Big Shot. The elderly man was well-dressed in clothes of a good cut and quality, but carelessly, as if clothes were of little importance to him.

"It must be hell on those poor devils with wives and families to support."

"I've no one but myself," said the Killer.

"But you need employment. I presume?"

"In the worst way."

THE elderly man studied him thoughtfully.

"My name," he said at length, "is Jukes— Doctor Jukes. Ever hear of it?"

"No."

"Ah, well," said the Doctor, "it isn't quite unknown to science. I am by way of being a physicist of some reputation. My papers on—" he brought himself up with a jerk. "What I meant to say is that I am interested in certain experiments for which I need a human subject. Nothing dangerous, you understand—mostly a matter of routine. But still important." He stroked his chin. "I'm willing to pay a young man like yourself forty dollars a week for a few weeks' employment at the most. Food and lodging included. You would, of course, lead a secluded life under my supervision for the duration of the experiments. What do you say?"

The Killer thought swiftly. Here was an opportunity to drop from sight for some time to come, a sanctuary in which to rest up while recouping his pocket-book. The old boy was lying, of course— there must be some risk to the experiment— but not as much risk as dying of lead poisoning.

"All right," he said briefly, "you've hired me."

The Doctor smiled Benevolently. "And your name is—"

"Brown." said the Killer without the least flicker of hesitation.

"Very well. Brown," said the Doctor, "if you'll follow me to my car—"

But the Killer shook his head. It was not likely that he was being observed, yet one never

"Just slip me your address," he said. "I'll be around later."

Doctor Jukes' residence was 1 out St. Mary's Road, in the foothills of the Tucson Mountains. Five acres of land were enclosed by a high fence of net-wire. Four buildings stood in this enclosure. The Doctor introduced the Killer to one of them, really a wing of the main residence, but only connected to it by a roofed passageway. This annex contained a suite of rooms which, if not luxurious—and the Killer was accustomed to a certain amount of luxury and refinement in his surroundings— were comfortably furnished.

There was a bedroom, bath and sitting-room, and a door led to a small patio or garden, some yards in extent, which was surrounded by a six-foot concrete wall.

"I believe you will find everything comfortable," said the Doctor.

A man servant, middle-aged, taciturn, prepared a bath, laid out shaving gear, and provided fresh linen and a suit of white duck that fitted the guest

fairly well. The Killer wondered from whence they came and, if he had known, might not have felt so easy in his mind.

As it was, he relaxed, and over a tastefully served meal studied his surroundings. Bars criss-crossed the high windows, he noticed, and when the servant finally went away by the passage door and left him to a magazine and a cigarette, the door automatically locked behind him.

But these trifles failed to disturb the Killer. Of course the Doctor could not be expected to give every stranger the run of his place. He congratulated himself on his luck in finding as secure a hiding place.

The next morning he was made rather ill by the injection of a solution into his arm.

"You'll be all right tomorrow," said the Doctor. But every day there was a new injection, and a week passed before he felt himself. Then he picked up surprisingly. It was a quiet existence. He walked or read in the little patio and sunned himself. Sometimes the Doctor's assistant, a stout nervous individual of uncertain age named Doctor Burdo, walked with him, taking notes of his condition. He was an old school-mate of Doctor Jukes and devoted to his interests. All this he told the Killer in his pleasant inconsequential chatter.

"Doctor Jukes is a great man," he said. "Famous, a genius."

Day by day the Killer found himself tingling more and more with the zest of living. His wits seemed to clarify. He thought of a thousand ways in which he could have disposed of the Big Shot and wondered why they had never occurred to him before. Also his sight became keener, almost microscopic in its keenness, he thought, and laughed at the conceit. But nothing escaped his eyes. The little lizards darting up the wall, and the activities of certain small bugs and insects.

He spent hours watching them. His increasing ability to hear was almost uncanny—the creaking of the floor, the soughing of the wind, and a myriad of small things rubbing wings and crawling. He was not alarmed. He knew these phenomena were the results of the Doctor's injections. The assistant quizzed him about them, made interminable notes.

One day in the garden he turned on him with a swift movement, a movement almost as swift and as lithe as that of a panther.

"Ah, but I feel strong," said the Killer. He flexed his arms. "I feel as if I could lift you over my head like an Indian club."

He caught the assistant playfully by the waist, and to his huge surprise—the assistant weighed nearly two hundred pounds— whirled him aloft like a feather. Once more on his feet, the assistant laughed shakily.

"I'll say you're strong."

That evening the assistant spoke at length to Doctor Jukes. The Doctor nodded.

"The experiment has been a glorious success. There's no need to carry it further. Give him the quietus in the morning."

The assistant hesitated. "Such a splendid fellow. It seems a pity to—"

"Come, come, Charles," laughed the Doctor. "No mawkish sentimentalism. Tomorrow," he said more seriously, "I am to meet Asbury, so I must leave the giving of the quietus to you."

THE KILLER was restless, his mind abnormally active. For the first time he resented being locked in at night. He gave one of the window-bars a tentative twist and it came away in his hand. With the sinuous grace of an animal he swung through the aperture and dropped to the ground beyond. It was cooler in the gardens than in his room. His nostrils quivered with delight. The night was intoxicatingly odorous, filled with murmurous sounds.

For awhile he paced back and forth, but soon it occurred to him that he had never seen beyond the confines of the walls hemming him in. On the other side was the laboratory, and the quarters of the assistant. Why not surprise Burdo with a call? He scaled the wall with ease. The laboratory door was latched but not locked. Unfortunately, however, the assistant had chosen that evening to dine out.

Filled with curiosity the Killer struck a match and turned on an electric light. It dimly revealed a long room almost meticulously neat. White porcelain sinks set against the wall, and stands and shelves with orderly rows of test-tubes and bottles containing chemical compounds or cultures.

Beyond was still another room, and when he opened its door something moaned and flashed by him with a screech. There was a crash behind him. Turning, he perceived that the creature, a monstrous pink rat, had taken refuge on a shelf over a sink, upsetting a number of bottles in doing so. At his approach it leaped from the shelf and fled through the outer door into the night. None of the bottles were broken. As nearly as possible, he rearranged them in their niches on the shelf, and somewhat ashamed of his misadventure, returned to his apartment and went to bed.

The bottles were similar in size, their contents colorless as water and indentifiable by the numbers over the niches in which they stood. A corresponding number was labeled on each bottle, but for the most part were small and almost illegible.

Still drowsy from the unaccustomed lack of sleep for it had been after midnight when he turned in, the assistant reached automatically and with

hardly a glance, for a certain bottle. Unwittingly he filled his hypodermic with— not the lethal dose intended— but the pure, undiluted secretion, minute quantities of which the Doctor had been injecting into his patient over a series of days. And it was this solution he shot into the Killer's arm.

2: The Quietus

TWO men were seated in the uptown office of Joshua Jukes, famous surgeon and scientist. One was Doctor Jukes himself, slim, with well-spaced eyes and a towering balded brow. The other was not less a personage than Vincent Asbury, Secretary of War. In some circles it was more than hinted that he was Frazzini's man. The Doctor either didn't now this or didn't care. He was a scientist, not a politician. His own motives were clear enough. He had made known his discovery to the War Department, offered his formula for sale, and as for the rest—

Vincent Asbury was speaking. He was a handsome man of fifty, with narrow, crafty eyes, and when standing carried his tall figure with noticeable distinction.

"You mean to tell me, Doctor Jukes, that this thing is possible?"

"Indeed, yes."

"But it sounds like a miracle."

"And one not to broadcast to the world. First my country—"

"Oh, yes, your country." Asbury carefully kept the smile from his face. "And if you can properly demonstrate your discovery, your country will reward you well. But how does it

"That's rather difficult to make clear to the lay mind. But you know the glandular theory?"

"Slightly."

"Well, it's through the injection of extracts, of course. Certain ductless glands have a secretion lately analyzed which empties directly into the blood. This secretion is what keeps the nerves of the body normal and healthy. It has been ascertained that too little flow produces nervous depression, sciatica, rheumatism, while too much brings about that abnormal condition which is usually diagnosed as genius or insanity. Walters of England, and Swenson of Sweden, have made important discoveries in this field. Indeed their Fol-Fos extract is now being used to heal certain types of mental disorders. What I have told you so far is the secret of no particular scientist or country."

"But this other?" asked Asbury anxiously.

"Is. You must know that I have devoted the last ten years of my life to the same research work engrossing Walters and Swenson. Curious things in

relation to ductless glands early claimed my attention. Some of my findings I published in medical and scientific journals, but others I kept to myself. First, because I had not substantiated them with the proper amount of proof; second, because I did not wish to be anticipated in the thing I sought to discover.

"But I have produced rats as large as cats, mice as large as rats, and other things which I had better not mention. Dogs grown into nightmares, rabbits that a little lack of manganese rob of the 'instinct' of mother love, and even of the desire and ability to mate. But enough. You understand that I worked, that I spared nothing in my investigations. Not even," said the scientist coolly, "men."

"Good heavens!"

"What would you? Some of them died, of course, and others went mad and had to be killed. But one must verify certain conclusions on the human. There is no other way. They were poor devils— martyrs to science, if you will. At any rate, they made possible what I have finally achieved."

Asbury made no audible retort, though he could not keep the distaste out of his face. Yet Doctor Jukes was right. The ethical value placed on human life is an uncertain thing. For reasons they knew nothing of, and that might not even concern them, he would send millions of soldiers to die and think little of it.

The scientist went on; "If one could handle the process which caused an increase in secretion in the ductless glands I have alluded to, would not that open the way to speeding up every function of the human body? That was, at first, a wild surmise on my part. But consider that man is a creature of his nerves. The sense perceptions, the reflex actions, even speed of thought itself, is dependent on the nervous system. The glands speed up the nerves, the nerves every sense and faculty of the human organism, including that of mind. And mind reacting back upon the nerves and glands again, keys up every sense and organ of the human

"This was the basis on which I worked. Failure after failure but increased my determination to succeed. Finally I met with some success in the case of animals. Then it was that I used, and am still using men. No need to relate the successes and failures there. Even the successes it was necessary to kill. I see you do not like that, but consider—could I allow my experiments to be bruited around? After years of work I was intoxicated with victory. See this bottle? Ten drops of its contents is enough to raise the normal powers of a healthy man ten times in excess of what he possesses. There is fol-fos in it, of course, and a portion of adrenalin, and— but that is my secret."

The habitual calmness of the great scientist returned to him. He placed the bottle carefully back on the desk and regarded the Secretary of War.

"Well, my dear sir?" he questioned.

Vincent Asbury said slowly, "I am thinking," and he was. He was visualizing a picked body of men with their physical powers raised to the zenith. What power could withstand them? His eyes narrowed. "If you can prove this secretion?"

"I can."

"Then listen..."

Doctor Jukes came from his interview with Vincent Asbury with a feeling that everything was well in the best of all possible worlds. He did not like Asbury, but money was to be his for further scientific investigations, and just in the nick of time, since his other resources had well-nigh dwindled away. Blithely he entered his home.

"Well, Charles?"

The assistant glanced at the clock. "I gave him the quietus at nine-thirty and never saw a man pass out so suddenly. I left him lying on the bed until your return."

The Doctor nodded. "I'll take a look at him before lunch."

He walked through the open passage. "A nice day," he thought, 'but hot." Nothing warned him that he was making his last observation on the weather.

HOW STRONG the accelerating secretion injected mistakenly into the Killer's arm was will never be known, but it must have been tremendous. Had his system not been accustomed gradually to increased doses over a period of days, the results would have been fatal. As it was, the sudden acceleration of heart and lung action brought him to the verge of death.

Darkness struck at the base of his skull with the suddenness of a sledgehammer and he collapsed into an inanimate heap. The assistant felt for his pulse, but the beat of it was so incredibly rapid as to register as no pulse at all. But the Killer was not dead, and during the hours he lay in a state of coma his whole bodily organization underwent a miraculous change. As suddenly as it had left him, consciousness returned and found him staring wide-eyed at the ceiling. Giddy, he was, and sick, but this soon passed, and in the moment of its passing Doctor Jukes entered the room and knelt by his side. The first thing the Doctor found remarkable was the heat radiating from the supposedly dead body and the flexibility of the wrist he took.

"What the devil!" he cried, starting up. "Here, Charles! The lad isn't dead." He stared at the wide glowing eyes. "You couldn't have given the quietus; you must have—"

But he never finished the sentence. Like a flickering shadow the Killer's hand shot out and took him by the throat. There was a sharp snap as the neck

broke, and in the same instant the body hurtled the room to crash against the far wall. The Killer surged to his feet. He had heard the Doctor's words, understood the situation and all that it implied.

"Kill me, would he, the dirty rat!" The motion of the Doctor's body fascinated him. It seemed to loaf along at snail-like speed. In reality its transit through the air occupied not three seconds. But everything in time and space had altered for the Killer. The assistant running for the door seemed a figure shown on a screen by a slow motion-picture camera. The lifting of his feet, the bending of knees, in fact, every motion of flight, was almost painfully slow and measured. Each detail could be watched.

The Killer had seen pictures of animals running like that. Long-legged giraffes sailing gracefully over African landscapes— slender deer slowed up in their flight so that patrons in theaters might study their methods of locomotion. For a moment he was startled. Then working at lightning speed, his mind grasped the explanation.

For weeks they had been speeding up his bodily organization, and now, now—

He moved. It was done with such swiftness that one might be forgiven for comparing it with that atom or electron which is said to shift positions without any intermediate action. In midstride he caught the assistant. One brush of the hand. It was like pushing over a mannequin that refused to fall, save as a feather topples. Then bare-headed, and clad in but trousers and a soft-collared shirt, he was out of the building, the grounds, and striding up the road.

An automobile crawled towards him, a taxicab, doing twenty miles an hour. Now was the test, his own strength against that of the gleaming car. Deliberately he blocked its way. The driver screamed at the sudden materialization of this slender, dark-faced man. Almost wildly he bore down on the brakes, sought to swerve, but the yawing machine was brought to an abrupt stop that catapulted him over the wheel, that flung the white-faced man in the rear seat forward across his shoulders.

With one negligent hand the Killer held the taxi motionless while its engine roared under a shaking hood, while its wheels still bit impotently at the packed dirt of the road.

3: "*Two Men Have Been Killed*"

WHEN Doctor Jukes left Vincent Asbury, Asbury went to his apartments in the exclusive Green Hotel and dismissed his secretary and valet.

"I'll not be needing you, Robbins," he told the man-servant, "until dinner-time. You may have the afternoon off." He was in Tucson incognito and, save for one or two discreet individuals, unknown.

Assured of privacy, he placed on a table a dark case that looked not unlike the container for a portable typewriter and raised the lid. The case certainly contained a machine but not of the typewriter variety.

At first glance it might have been mistaken for a radio. Indeed it was that, and something more. In fact the contrivance represented the last word in radio-television devices, the invention of a great inventor who had sold it for a price—five million dollars to be exact. The inner surface of the upraised lid was a burnished screen. Connecting the device to a light socket by means of an extension cord, Asbury threw a switch and twirled a dial.

Instantly the room was filled with a spttering noise. 302 M-9b, he spelt carefully. The sputtering fell, rose, died away. He leaned so that his face was fully caught by the light of a bluish bulb. The burnished screen clouded, clarified, and in it grew the features of a man.

"Hello," said a voice faintly, as if from an immense distance.

"Hello yourself. This Number Two speaking. Yes, Number Two. Is the Big Shot there?"

"Sure," said the faint voice. "He's been waiting for your call. Just a moment." The features faded, and in a minute was succeeded by those of a man whose face expressed ruthless power. The eyes were wide-set, with heavy lids, and even in this television picture, which gave no distinct colors, save white and black, you knew that they were greenish.

The cheeks were fleshy, the lips thick but well-shaped, and one cheek was scarred as if by an old burn. The newspapers of the world had broadcast that face. It had been shown in newsreels and magazines. A nationally known face it was, as familiar as that of the President of the United States, or of a movie star— the face of Frazzini, millionaire bootlegger, king of racketeers. It smiled genially now, showing a set of white even teeth.

"That you, Vincent?"

"Yes. I'm speaking from Tucson."

"How is everything?"

"I saw Doctor Jukes about that discovery of his he offered the government—through me." He laughed softly. "Of course he thinks he's doing business with Uncle Sam."

"And the discovery?"

"It's a wonderful thing. Listen, Frazzini, a shot of it would make our boys irresistible." He went into details. "The effect wears off in time, but while it lasts—"

"You made him an offer?"

"Of a million cash—with a hundred thousand yearly for further research work. He understands that the deal is secret—for reasons of State, ha, ha!"

Frazzini spoke incisively. "See the Doctor at once and tell him you will have a government official and two secret-service men call on him tomorrow for a practical demonstration. I shall leave here with Landy and Cococetti almost immediately. Reserve rooms for us at your hotel. Understand?"

"Yes. On the top floor, I suppose? Chicago is twelve hundred miles away as the crow flies. That means you will get in—"

"In twelve hours at the outside. Have everything arranged. Good-by."

Thoughtfully Vincent Asbury removed the connections and closed the case. Lighting a cigarette he moved over and stared unseeingly out of the window. Frazzini could make him president of the United States— and would. But nevertheless he irked under the gang chieftain's control. Given the opportunity, he would blot out Frazzini— like that. But right now he needed him, and the organization he controlled.

His mind busy with all its torturous thoughts, he called up the desk and asked that a taxi be summoned. At the same time he reserved the rooms. It was summer and not difficult to get the location desired. Descending, he took his seat in the taxi and giving Doctor Jukes' address, sank back with closed eyes. Up Congress the car sped, then north, and then west again. Suddenly the car stopped with a jerk and he was hurled violently forward into the back of the driver. The shock nearly dislocated his neck.

"What the devil!" he cried when he had recovered his breath. "What does this mean?" and then paused with mouth half open, staring into a dark expressionless face and cold grey eyes!

Every atom was rioting in Killer Mike's body. By almost imperceptible degrees the potent solution was increasing in intensity. There was no reckoning how fast the Killer's faculties were functioning. He laughed sardonically, an eerie laugh.

"Ha, ha! If it isn't Number Two!" Even in that brief second of stopping the car, and while Asbury was yet engrossed in his own thoughts, the Killer heard him thinking. Yes, heard; for him it seemed that Vincent Asbury had been talking aloud. The Behaviorists claim that all reasoning is a matter of sub-vocalization, that literally one does talk to himself when thinking. To the ears of the Killer this subvocalizing process was audible as sound.

He heard the war secretary mention the Big Shot's name, the Doctor's, think of the coming of Frazzini, mouth over his own plans, ambitions— and all in a fraction of time quite long to him. The taxi-driver, knocked limp for the moment, recovered with a curse, and took his foot from the gas.

"Hey, you!" he bellowed, lunging at the Killer with intent to grab him by the collar. "What do you mean by this, hey?"

The Killer watched the lunge with impersonal interest. Bah! The fellow was slow! He seemed to float through space, split seconds being minutes. The killer brushed him away lazily, and watched him going backward in the same leisurely fashion to collapse in a heap from which he did not stir. But to the war secretary the action had taken place with almost unbelievable swiftness. He had recognized Killer Mike, as Killer Mike had recognized him, and knew that he was condemned by the Big Shot and his life

In the very instant that the driver surged forward he drew his automatic and fired. But the Killer's eyes caught the gesture. Without trouble he avoided the bullet and threw out his fist. Struck by what he never had a chance to see. Vincent Asbury sagged back.

Again the Killer laughed, an eerie whisper of a laugh, and turned and was gone so swiftly that to the staring occupant of the second-hand Buick that had pulled up behind the taxi, and to the man in the office of the greenhouse bordering one side of the road, he seemed to flicker and vanish into nothing. The taxi stood with throbbing engine.

"What the devil!" said the driver of the second-hand Buick, rubbing his eyes. Then he clambered from his seat and peered into the taxi. At what he saw, he gave a gasp of horror. The man from the greenhouse came running across the road.

"What's the matter?" he panted.

"Matter— matter— Can't you see what's the matter?" He pointed wildly at the bloody features of the taxi-driver, at the horribly crushed in skull of the secretary of war. "That's what's the matter! Murder! Two men have been killed!"

But the Killer did not hear. He was gone like a wraith. The world seemed to stand still as he glided along. The scent of mankind was heavy in his nostrils— but above all the individual odor of Asbury. It hung in the hot air like a thin, evil trail. It smelled, thought the Killer sardonically, like one might expect the crooked, oily mind of Asbury to look. It was not difficult to follow. In a few minutes he was at the hotel.

The clerk did not see him, nor the bellhops sitting in a braided row. The fat man coming down the stairs to get the exercise his doctor ordered, wondered what it was that brushed by and nearly sent him sprawling. He could have sworn that a voice said, "I beg your pardon," but no one was in sight. Much shaken in mind and body he waddled to the elevator shaft and rang the bell. Blast the doctors! It was a hot day and too much exertion made a man feel queer.

Still following the trail, the Killer came to the correct door and opened it by the simple expedient of pushing. Yes, there was the television-radio. His face twisted into a deadly grin. Every atom and fibre of his body was dancing. Put him on the spot, would he? Why nothing could touch him now. nothing—neither men nor gun! And if he wished—

With a swift, lithe motion he opened the television case.

In the underworld of America they spoke of him with bated breath, his friends admiringly, fawningly, his enemies bitterly and with curses. Rumor had it that he had started his career in a gambling house. When Big Tim was chief, he had been his favorite guard. When Little Arne broke through Big Tim's defense, those in the know said that Arne had first fixed it with him. If that were the truth, it hadn't kept him from driving past Little Arne's flowershop one day and riddling him with lead.

He was ambitious, ruthless, and with more than a touch of organizing genius. The result was that where other gang leaders went to the graveyard or abroad, he built up a vast illegal business of forty millions a year. Over his immediate followers he ruled with an iron hand, the whilst he wiped out competition with bribes— or a machine gun. He was king, despot, the one and only chief of racketeers, Frazzini, the Big Shot, the most feared and powerful man in the country.

His Chicago home was a fortress. It stood on the top of a skyscraper. The approach to the roof was cunningly guarded. Frazzini knew, none better, that there were envious souls who would like to bump him off— some for the honor of doing it—and some to step into his shoes. At the particular moment we see him, he has turned from speaking to Asbury on the television-radio. He is a big man with broad shoulders, forty years of age.

"Get in touch with the boys at once, Jim," he directs his lieutenant, "and tell them we leave for the West within the hour. Have the planes made ready." Jim Landy nods and leaves the room.

He is a man of few words. Soon Frazzini hears the mechanic tuning up the engines of the specially constructed autogiros. With rotating wings of the most advanced design, they could take off in a fifteen-yard run, land at twelve miles an hour, and carry twelve passengers apiece in their comfortable cabins. For a moment Frazzini hesitates and then rings a bell. To the man answering, he speaks tersely.

"Tell my wife I wish to see her."

She came at length, a queenly creature in a trailing robe, with sleek, dark hair and a colorless face.

"Well?" she questioned tonelessly.

"Nothing," he said, "only I thought you'd better know—" He broke off abruptly. "Why in the devil are you going on like this?"

"Am I going on?"

"You know what I mean."

Her eyes flashed.

He said stormily: "It's me who ought to be sore. Who picked you out of a dance hall, made you what you are?"

"As if I should be grateful for that! What am I, anyway?"

"You are my wife."

"Oh, yes, your wife. How wonderful! The vice-king's wife."

"You didn't talk like that when I asked you to marry me."

"Would to God I had!"

He paced the room for a moment.

"Gloria," he said more softly, laying a hand on her shoulder, "you used to love me a little. Isn't there some of that liking left?"

She shrugged from his hand. "Don't touch me, please. Your hands are dirty."

"Because I run booze?"

"You know what I mean. I don't care about that. It's the other vile traffic."

"I swear to you—"

"Please don't lie," she said contemptuously. "You lied to me before. I found out."

His mouth narrowed into a thin slit. "From that traitorous rat Killer Mike! But he won't betray any more secrets."

"What have you done with him?"

"Ha, ha! So that touched you, eh? Worried about Mike?"

"You know that's a falsehood."

"Yes," he almost whispered at length, "I believe it is. If I didn't—"

With a gust of hungry emotion he swept her into his arms.

"Gloria, Gloria! Look at me, girl! You're mine, see! And you love me in spite of yourself! Yes, you do. I'm bad and vile, but you love me! I've got to go on—don't you see that? I can't stop— and Killer Mike is in my way. It wasn't only because he spoke to you— I could forgive that— but he actually plotted!" He freed her and stepped back. "Plotted to split the gang and rule in my shoes." He raised a fateful hand. "Do you think he can do that and get away with it? No, I must make an example of him for the benefit of others. Killer Mike is doomed." He stopped abruptly. "What is that?"

The whirr of the television-radio sounder filled the room. He stepped forward and threw the switch, standing so that the blue light irradiated his features, scanning the burnished screen set against the wall.

"Hello, Frazzini speaking. Is that you, Asbury?"

A thin eerie laugh swept out of the device.

"No," said a metallic voice. It seemed to come from an immense distance. "This isn't Asbury. This is—"

Frazzini's wife gave an audible gasp. In the burnished depths of the screen grew a face, a cold, dark face with frosty gleaming eyes.

"Killer Mike!" exclaimed Frazzini.

"Yes," said the metallic voice, "Killer Mike." Again the eerie laugh swept the room. "You'll never see Asbury alive again. I was obliged to remove him. Do you understand, Frazzini? Place him on the spot—as I intend to place you! No," went on the metallic voice, "I'm not crazy, not all hopped up as you think. Not with coke. I can read your mind, Frazzini. You are thinking you'll wire the police to hold me until you come. How clever you are! But not as clever as me, Frazzini. Not as clever 'as the Man-plus'."

4: Into the Desert

THE sensational automobile murders, the slaying of the famous Doctor Jukes and his assistant, were headline news. Within an hour of their discovery, a half dozen extras were being sold.

"Mystery Murders on The St. Mary's Road," screamed one black streamer. Others shrieked "Fiendish Murders Shrouded in Mystery: Police Baffled."

The two witnesses of the automobile murders were quoted.

"The taxi suddenly stopped, just like that," said the driver of the second-hand Buick. "I had to jam on the brakes hard to keep from running into it."

"Yes," corroborated the other, "I was looking out my greenhouse windows and saw the whole thing. A man was clinging to the side of the taxi, though I don't know where he came from."

Both witnesses described the man as being of medium height, clad in white trousers and a soft white shirt. Neither saw the actual killings. One was too far away, and the other's view was interrupted by the rear of the taxi.

Doctor Jukes' servant testified that a young man answering such a description had been a patient of the Doctor. But the greatest sensation transpired when one of the bodies in the taxi was identified as that of Vincent Asbury. The identification was made by Robbins, the valet, and by his private secretary.

"Yes," said the secretary, "Mr. Asbury had been in Tucson incognito on government business." No. he didn't know what that business was, but it had to do with the department he headed and a chemical discovery of Doctor Jukes.

"Secretary of War Murdered For War Secret," captioned one paper. Excitement was running high when the chief of police received the following telegram from Chicago authorities:

CONFIDENTIAL INFORMATION THAT ASBURY, WAR SECRETARY, KILLED OR INJURED. ARREST AT ONCE MICHAEL FLIANI, ALIAS 'KILLER MIKE,' NOTORIOUS GUNMAN AND GANGSTER. DESCRIPTION: HEIGHT, FIVE FEET, SEVEN AND ONE-HALF INCHES; WEIGHT, ONE- HUNDRED FIFTY POUNDS; COMPLEXION DARK, WITH BLACK HAIR AND GREY EYES. LOOKS LIKE AN ITALIAN. OFFICERS ARRIVING BY AIR. ANSWER.

"Well what do you think of that!" muttered the chief of police. But he was canny enough to keep the telegram from the reporters; and in the early hours of the morning a big autogiro fell silently out of the heavens and settled on the flat roof of the Green Hotel.

From it stepped Frazzini and went at once to the suite Asbury had reserved, surrounded by a bodyguard of slim hard-faced men with hands on ready weapons. With him was a prominent member of a Chicago strike-breaking agency, really a henchman of Frazzini. The Big Shot sent word to the agency head that he wanted to see him. It was actually a summons from the gang chieftain. The head of the strike-breakers stared with reverent awe at the king of racketeers. Frazzini did the talking.

"This Killer Mike used to be a member of my organization, see? But he raised a ruckus and I threw him out. Why he wanted to kill Asbury is a mystery to me." Of course the visitor had his own opinion about that. He knew of the rumors connecting the war secretary with the man who spoke. "Now I want my men to cooperate with yours in hunting him down and through you I wish to offer a five thousand dollar reward for his capture. Understand?"

The visitor nodded. He understood.

"There's another planeful of my men coming. Will be here in an hour or so. This killer Mike must be captured. He—"

The low whisper of a laugh filled the room.

"What's that?" cried Frazzini. The gunmen were on their feet, weapons in hand.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Frazzini whirled. Behind him, almost against the wall, stood the figure of a man in white duck trousers and a light shirt. He hadn't been there a moment before, no one had seen him enter, and yet he had walked through a corridor dominated by armed men, entered the open door of the room with a stride.

"Ha, ha, ha!" It was the Killer laughing. He saw the weapons of the gunmen go up— slowly— as if manipulated by men scarcely able to move. When Frazzini whirled it was as if the motion would never be finished. Lazily he

sidestepped the loafing bullets. But to the astounded gunmen it appeared as if he had flickered out of existence at one point and into it again at another. The bullets buried themselves in the wall. There was a splintering of plaster, and from somewhere beyond frightened cries.

"It's no use, boys," said the Killer. "Bullets can't hit me."

The guards shrank back with scared faces. At bottom they were a superstitious lot. Knowing nothing of Doctor Jukes' accelerating solution, the phenomenon witnessed admitted of but one explanation. The Killer was dead. They were fighting the Killer's ghost!

But Frazzini understood. The marvelous discovery of Doctor Jukes was being utilized by Killer Mike. He was speeded up in sense and faculty.

"So you realize the truth," hissed the Killer. "Yes, I am speeded up. I can even hear your thoughts. Compared to me, ordinary men are as snails. I can out-move, out-think, out-fight— Ah, you would, would you!" His hand flicked out and the Chicago strike-breaker, of sterner metal than his companions, went back with a crash and lay in a still heap upon the floor. "I have waited for you, Frazzini, as I said I would, to put you on the spot. But the spot isn't here. First, I'm taking you for a ride, Frazzini."

He moved. Chairs went over with a crash. A gunman fired. There was a stifled scream, and then seized in an overmastering grip and carried forward at tremendous speed, the king of the racketeers lost consciousness.

STRANGE things were happening to the Killer.

Bearing his burden he strode through the night like a wraith. First he went north until he reached the desert, and then northwest. He was Killer Mike, the Big Shot and the empire of gangsterdom was in the hollow of his hand. And not alone the empire of gangsterdom— that of America, the world. He laughed, and his wild eerie laugh echoed through the night. White-faced men and women paused to listen.

"A coyote," said some. "No coyote ever howled like that," said others.

Official Tucson was in a ferment. Posses were being formed. But the killer strode on. Not only every sense and faculty was now accelerated, not only every atom and molecule, but under his clothes his flesh was shimmering, expanding, as the atoms and molecules whirled in ever increasing orbits. The heat was unbearable.

He tore the binding clothes from his body as he walked. Where the Oracle Road turned off from the main highway he paused. Passing motorists saw the gigantic figure of a naked giant brooding under the stars. This giant carried the limp figure of another man in his arms. Stopped by policeman, the motorists

related what they had seen. But when the former, armed with machine guns and gas bombs reached the spot, the Killer had vanished.

It was four o'clock in the morning when he came to Oracle. Sleep hovered over that mountain hamlet of eighty-nine souls and no one witnessed his coming. He had covered hundreds of miles in his wandering, quartering this way and that. Once he had even stood on the peak above the "window" in the Catalinas and looked down upon Tucson far, far below. He approached Oracle from the south, over the hills and ranges, and on a rocky eminence behind the small town set his burden down.

Frazzini was not dead. He came to himself in the clear mountain dawn lying on a stubble of rock and coarse grass. His uncomprehending eyes at first took in the sky, the rugged scenery and northward purple distance. He sat up, and in the act of doing so saw the Killer. But was this Killer Mike, this naked, seven-foot giant whose silvery flesh seemed to seethe and churn? Frazzini was a brave man, he possessed undoubted physical courage, but in this situation was something so strange, so weird and uncanny, that the heart fluttered in his bosom, the blood ran cold, and for the first time in his life he really understood the meaning of the word fear.

In the ever deepening dawn a Mexican lad passed with a string of burros and stared fearfully at the two figures on the crest of the hill.

"*Madre Dios*!" he cried.

His ragged heels beat a frightened tattoo into the sides of his mount as he urged it by at its best speed. Where the narrow trail crossed a dirt road a half mile beyond, he met a car of armed men and a woman.

"*Si, senors*," he said, in answer to their questions, "I saw two hombres." He crossed himself devoutly. "One naked. Surely the devil himself! And the other—" But the armed men and the woman were running up the trail down which he had come.

Madness, or perhaps it was a clarity of vision beyond that of earth, had the Killer in its grip. The acceleration of every sense and faculty was sweeping swiftly towards an incredible climax. Earth and sky were shifting, changing. The thoughts of Frazzini beat on his ears. Who was this Frazzini? Frazzini was his enemy. But what meaning could that phrase have for him when the whole world was heaving, churning. His glowing eyes chained those of the other.

"Be still," he commanded. Frazzini was silent. Even his thought was stilled. It was good to be free of the clamoring noise that was the other's terrified mind, twisting, turning.

Even as it ceased, he forgot Frazzini's existence, for Frazzini disappeared; the rugged hillside, the sweep of brown landscape going down to the river and

sweeping up again, miles away, to the Mammoth Range, was also blotted out, and he gazed into a new world, another dimension!

It was an ethereal place, a place of indescribable loveliness, and far away under the rays of an emerald sun formed the spires and domes of a mystical city. Out of the crystal clarity of western sky, just after the sun has dipped below illusive hills and before night comes to mantle the desert, seemed this city fashioned, and almost as impalpable and remote— a crystal city in an opalescent world.

Was it the figment of a delirious mind, or did it actually exist an octave or two beyond the vibration of earthly matter? If it did really exist. then only the Killer's vision achieved a note high enough to glimpse it. For his body never passed beyond the fleshly rhythm that chained his feet to this world.

Though he ran like the wind and came to the environs of that mystical city, though he saw celestial beings of a god-like stature and beauty, and wonders indescribable, though he wandered through the space they occupied, everything remained just that to him— space, and nothing more. Sometimes things were below him, sometimes above and sometimes all around. But wherever they were, he could not touch, he could not handle, he could not make himself real, and in the end they faded.

When the accelerating fluid in his system reached its weird climax and began to recede, it was with devastating swiftness. The giant body shrunk in on itself, the eyes became burnt out coals. Searching for the vision he had lost, the mystical city always beyond the horizon, hungry and thirsty and mad, the Killer wandered through the desert, until at last he stumbled over a mound of earth and lacked the strength to rise.

THEY FOUND Frazzini sitting dumbly on the hillside. But the Big Shot only stared at them uncomprehendingly.

"What's the matter, chief?" begged his henchmen. Frazzini did not answer. His wife who had come to Tucson on the second plane, sank beside him and took him in her arms. Forgotten was her bitterness. "Tony," she wept, "Tony! Don't you know me, dear?"

But no recognition or intelligence would ever look out of those blank eyes. The perverted genius that would have made the very government of the United States a department in an empire of vice was dead— and ironically enough, the man who had willed this mind, this genius to cease, and who alone could bid it again to exist, had forgotten the fact, was himself mad.

But though they found Frazzini, the Killer was never found. Rewards were offered for him, dead or alive. The desert was scoured. But all in vain. Once a group of searchers paused at an old Mexican woman's abode. This was near

the New Mexican border. No, the old woman said, they tended the sheep, she and her son out there, but they had never seen any one.

But she told them nothing of the one great experience of her life— how her son had died from a snakebite the week before and in her loneliness and grief she had prayed the Virgin Mary to restore him to her. Nor how she had dreamed that this prayer was answered, and when she had gone to the grave, it was to find a man's body lying across it. The man did not look like her son, it is true, but she was old and superstitious and persuaded that a miracle had happened.

So for her the dead had risen, and the Killer became her son.

Only somewhere in his befogged brain remained the memory of a celestial city— the old woman who understood English and who listened to his mutterings, thought he talked of the heaven he had left to return to her— and as he tended the sheep he would stare longingly at the blue distance. Sometimes the old mother would have to come and lead him home.

But of other things, he remembered nothing.

8: The Smell

Strange Tales of Mystery And Terror Jan 1932

THE famous physician, a noted member of the Society of Psychical Research, pulled thoughtfully at his pipe.

"During all the years of my investigation of strange phenomena, have I ever run across anything that defied what we please to call natural explanation? Well, that is hard to say; I don't know. Only years ago—" he paused and lit a match.

"Perhaps I had better tell you about it."

AT THE TIME I was a young doctor practicing medicine in a small town in Nova Scotia. That was before I became a member of the Society, but not before I had become interested in spiritualism and kindred subjects. At college I had studied under Munstenburg, and witnessed some of his unique experiments in relation to hypnotism. Munstenburg also conducted some other peculiar inquiries into what is called occult or secret wisdom, but this latter fact is known to but few. It was under him I matriculated in psychology—and in some other things which colleges neither recognize nor give degrees for.

Naturally I acquired an assortment of bizarre facts and experiences, and a large library composed of other than dry treatises on medicine. It was my good fortune to possess a small income independent of my practice, and this enabled me to devote more time to reading and study than to patients. I had an office in what was called the Herald Building, and rooms at the 'Brunswick,' a rooming and boarding house of the old-fashioned type. I not only lodged at the 'Brunswick,' I took most of my meals there.

One evening I was sitting in my room after dinner, enjoying my pipe and a book of Hudson's, *A Hind in Hyde Park*, when a hasty knock sounded at the door.

"Come in," I called perfunctorily, and there entered a young man of slender build, pale face and indeterminate features, with dark hair and eyes. He was a recent boarder at the "Brunswick," Lemuel Mason by name, and only a few days before the landlady had introduced me to him at the breakfast table. I gleaned the fact that he was (though he did not look it) of fisher stock down Lunenburg way. He was a graduate of a normal school, and expected, within the month after summer vacation, to take a position as teacher in a local private academy. A quiet young man, he appeared, in the middle twenties, commonplace enough.

Only with the observant eyes of a physician I had noticed at the dinner table that he looked quite ill; his pale face was unusually haggard, even distraught. His first words were startling enough.

"Doctor, tell me, am I going mad?"

"Probably not," I answered with what I hoped was a reassuring smile. "Otherwise you would scarcely ask the question. But tell me, what is disturbing you?"

Almost incoherently he talked, and I studied him attentively as he did so. Afterwards I gave him a thorough examination.

"No," I said, "you are not mad; you are perfectly normal in every way. All your reflexes and reactions, both physical and mental, are what they should be. There is a little nervous tension, of course, some natural excitement from the strangeness of the experiences you say you have undergone, an experience, I again assure you, that will prove to have a simple and scientific explanation."

I said all this, being certain of nothing, but only desirous of calming my patient at the moment. I realized that it would take a longer period of observation to determine his mental condition.

"Tell me, what is your room like?" He had already informed me that he lodged in another house about two blocks away.

"It is a small room, Doctor; about as large as your ante-room out there."

"And how is it furnished?"

"With a single iron bed, a bureau, desk and two chairs."

"Tell me again of your experience, slowly."

"I took the room because it was cheap; and because of its reputation I got it for a nominal sum."

"Reputation? What do you mean?"

"I don't know exactly. Some girl died there, I believe. But I have never been a nervous individual; I don't believe in ghosts or such nonsense. So I leapt at the opportunity to be economical."

"And what did you see?"

"Nothing. That's the curious part of it." He laughed huskily.

"But I've smelt—"

"Is there any opening from your room that gives on another chamber?"

"No. Only the door and the transom above it, opening on the hall."

"Does anyone else mention smelling anything?"

"Not that I know of."

"And the window?"

"Opens on the rear garden. There is a plum tree outside the window, and a bed of flowers, pansies and rose bushes."

"Are you sure you do not smell them? On a warm sultry evening the perfume can sometimes be quite overpowering."

"No, Doctor, it was nothing at all like that. Let me describe again what happened. I moved into the room yesterday afternoon. At nine o'clock I went to bed. My window was open, of course, and the transom over the door ajar. For perhaps an hour I read— maybe longer. Even while reading I was conscious of sniffing some subtle perfume, and once or twice I got up and went into the hall, but, when I did, the smell vanished. However, it was only the suggestion of a smell; so finally I turned out the light and went to sleep.

"What time was it the smell awakened me, I do not know, but the room was full of it. It was not a fragrant smell— not the odor of damp earth and breathing flowers—but rather, of something unpleasant; something, I am sure, that was rotten. Not that I thought so at the time, for during the experience I was intoxicated by the odor. That is the ghastly part of the whole business. I tell you I lay on the bed and luxuriated in that smell. I actually rolled in it, rolling on the mattress, over and over, as you may have seen dogs rolling in carrion. My whole body seemed to gulp in the foul atmosphere, every inch and pore of it; my skin muscles twitched, and from head to foot I was conscious of such exquisite rapture and delight that it beggars description.

"All night I lay on the bed and wallowed in that delicious sea of perfume; and then suddenly it was daylight and I could hear people stirring in other rooms. The smell was gone, and I was conscious of being sick and weak; so sick that I retched and vomited and could eat no breakfast. And it was then I realized that all night I had revelled in the odor of rottenness, of something unspeakably foul, but at the time desirable and piercingly sweet. So I came to you."

HE leaned back, exhausted, and for a moment I was at a loss what to say. But only for a moment. You will remember that I was reading Hudson's book, *A Hind in Hyde Park*, when interrupted. If you have ever read the book, you will recollect that a portion of it deals with the sense of smell in animals. By a strange coincidence— if anything can be termed merely a coincidence— I was reading that section, and also several passages devoted to a dissertation on dreams. Taking refuge in an explanation quoted by Hudson, I said soothingly:

"The condition is evidently a rare but quite explainable one. I suppose you know something of the nature of dreams. A sleeping man pricks his hand with a pin and a dream follows to account for the prick. He dreams that he is rambling in a forest on a hot summer's day and throws himself down in the shade to rest; and while resting and perhaps dozing, he is startled by a slight

rustling sound, and looking around is terrified to observe a venomous snake gliding towards him with uplifted head. The serpent strikes and pierces his arm, and the pain of the bite awakes the man. You see that the serpent's bite is the culmination in a dramatic scene which had taken some time in the acting; yet the whole dream, with its feeling, thoughts, acts, began and ended with the pin prick."

"But what has that to do with my case?" he asked.

"Everything," I replied, with more confidence than I felt. "In your case the pin prick is an odor. Some strange perfume strikes a sensitive portion of your nostril and instantly you are thrown into a dream, a nightmarish condition, to account for the smell. Since the case of the dream is an odor and not a pin prick, the time of the dream was of longer duration, that is all."

A little color came back into his face.

"It seemed to me that I was wide awake through it all," he said slowly, "but that was doubtless an illusion. Doctor, you relieve my mind of a great fear. You are sure—"

"Certain," I said briskly, feeling certain of nothing but the psychological effect of my words in calming his mind. "The weather is somewhat cool now, and you had better sleep with your window and transom closed to-night, to shut out the disturbing odor. I shall give you a prescription for a sedative to insure sound sleep. Don't worry yourself any further about it."

A queer case, I thought, as he went away, but how queer I did not realize until...

THE doctor paused and relit his pipe.

"If I had only known then what I know now! But I was young and inexperienced. It is true that I possessed the book. But much of it was a sealed mystery to me. Besides, it seemed absurd to connect.... Despite the witnessing of many queer experiments, the deep study I had already made of strange manuscripts on ancient wisdom, I did not as yet realize the terrible reality that lies behind many occult symbols and allegories. Therefore I had almost persuaded myself that Lemuel Mason's experience had indeed been the result of a nightmare, when I was startled to have him break into my rooms the next morning with a ghastly face and almost hysterical manner. I forced him to swallow a stiff whiskey.

"What is the matter?" I asked him.

"My God, Doctor, the smell!'

"What?"

"It came again."

"Go on."

"In all its foulness and rottenness. But this time I not only smelled it, I heard it, and felt—"

"Steady, man, steady!"

"Give me another drink. Oh, my God! It whispered and whispered. What did it whisper? I can't remember. Only things that drove me into an ecstasy of madness. Wait! There is one word. I remember it."

"With shaking lips he uttered a name that made me start. No, I will not say what that name was. It is not good for man to hear some things. Only I had already seen it in the book. I shook him roughly.

"And then, then..."

"I felt it, I tell you, all night. Its body was long and sinuous, cold and clammy, the body of a serpent, and yet of a woman too. I held it in my arms and caressed it.... Oh, it was lovely, lovely— and unspeakably vile!" He fell, shuddering, into a chair.

"AND now," said the doctor, "I must tell of the criminal thing I did. Yes, though I sensed the danger in which the man stood, I persuaded him to spend another night in his room. I was young, remember, and it came over me that here was an opportunity to study a strange phenomenon at first hand. Besides, I believed that I could protect him from any actual harm.

"A little knowledge," said the doctor slowly, "is a dangerous thing. I did not then know that beyond a certain point of resistance there is no safety for man or beast, save in flight and that Lemuel Mason had passed that point."

I WAS AGOG with excitement, eloquent in my determination to delve further into the matter. Lemuel Mason's one desire was to flee, to never again cross the threshold of the accursed room.

"It is haunted,' he cried, "haunted!"

God forgive me, I overcame his reluctance.

"You must face this thing; it would be madness to run away."

And I believed what I said. I fortified him with stimulants, prevailed on him to put his trust in me, and that evening we went to his room together; for I was to stay the night with him.

The house that held the room was an old one, one of a street full of ancient dwellings. People of means, of fashion had inhabited it thirty years before. But the fashionable quarter had shifted southward, the people had died or moved, and the once substantial mansion had fallen on evil days. The wide corridors were dark and gloomy, as only old corridors can be dark and gloomy; the

painted walls faded and discolored, and as I followed Lemuel Mason up two flights of stairs, I was conscious of a musty odor, an odor of dust and decay.

The room was, as he had described it, at the end of a long hall, in the rear, designed doubtless for the use of a servant; it was rather small and stuffy, with nothing distinctive about it except its abnormally high ceiling. Yet was it real, or only my imagination, that something brooded in the room? Imagination, I decided, and lit all three gas jets.

IT was nine o'clock. Mason collapsed on the bed. I had administered a powerful sedative. In a few minutes he was sleeping as peacefully as a child. Seated in one chair with my feet propped up on another, I smoked my pipe, and read, and watched. I was not jumpy, my nerves were steady enough. The book that I read was the strange one by that medieval author whose symbol is the Horns of Onam. Few scholars have ever seen a copy of it. My own was given me by—but that doesn't matter. I read it, I say, fascinated by the hidden things, the incredible, yes, even horrible things hinted at on every page, and by the strange drawings and weird designs.

I heard other people mount the stairs and go to their various rooms. Only one other room was occupied on this floor, I noticed, and that was at the far end of the corridor. Soon everything became very still. I glanced at my watch, and saw that it was twelve-thirty. There was no noise at all, save the almost inaudible creakings and groanings which old houses give voice to at midnight, and the little sighing sounds the air made as it bubbled through the gas. These noises did not disturb me at all. I had watched in old houses before, and my mind automatically classified them for what they were.

But suddenly there was something else, something that... I sniffed involuntarily; I surged to my feet. The room was full of a strange odor, an odor that was like a tangible, yet invisible, presence, an insidious odor that sought to lull me, overcome my senses. But I was wide awake, forewarned of my danger. Three gas jets were burning to give me added confidence, and I fought off the influence of that smell with every effort of will.

Almost I felt it recoil before the symbol I drew in the air with my finger; but even as the odor grew faint and remote, I saw Mason straighten on the bed with a convulsive sigh, roll over and sit up. I sat by him again. His eyes were shut, but his face— Never have I seen human face express such emotions of delirious rapture and delight. And it was written not only on his face. His whole body writhed and twisted and squirmed in an abandonment of ecstasy that was horrible to watch. With a cry, I leapt to his side.

"Mason!" I shouted, "wake up! Wake up!"

But he paid me no attention. His hands went out in sensuous gestures, as if they handled something; fondled it, caressed it. I shook him roughly.

"Mason! Mason!"

"Oh," he crooned, smoothing the air, his body writhing under my touch, his lips forming amorous kisses and endearing words.

"For God's sake, man!'

"But the evil spell held him; it was beyond my frantic efforts to arouse him. The smell came in waves that rose and receded. Then, calling on every atom of occult lore upon which I depended, I drew around us the sacred pentegram. "Begone!" I cried, uttering the incommunicable name, and that name which it is tempting madness for the human tongue to utter. "By the power of Three in One, by the Alpha and Omega, by the Might of The Eternal Monad—back!" I commanded.

I felt it go from myself, but not from Mason. Still his body writhed and twisted with voluptuous ecstasy. His face radiated unhuman lust and joy, and his hands, his hands.... With a feeling of unutterable horror I realized that he was beyond the protection of any magic I could invoke to save him.

"Oh," he crooned, with that smoothing gesture. "Oh, oh, oh." He went on like that, mumbling occasionally, "The feel of your skin, the fragrance of it. Closer, beloved, closer. Whisper, whisper...."

And then in a thrilling undertone that made my scalp prickle on my head, he said, "I have felt you, heard you. Let me see you, let me see you."

But he must not see! I knew that. I must drag him beyond the room before he could see. With both hands I seized his body. Only I seemed to be dragging not only his body but another that clung to it, resisted my efforts, disputed every inch of the way to the door. My senses reeled; once again the smell poured in on me like an invisible fog.

Fear, blind, corroding fear had me in its grip. Like a man in a nightmare I struggled. Would I never reach the door? The invisible antagonist tugged, pulled. Three feet to go; two; one. With a last desperate effort I crashed against the door with the full weight of my body. Fortunately the door opened outwardly and the catch was weak. With a splintering of rotten woodwork, it gave under my lunge and I went staggering into the hall, still clinging to Mason. And even as I did so I heard him shriek terribly, once, twice, and then go limp in my hands.

All over the house doors banged, voices shouted, and the lodger in the room at the farther end of the hall came rushing out in a nightgown that flapped at his bare shanks. "For God's sake," he cried, "what's the matter here?"

But I did not answer. For staring down on the face of Mason on which was frozen a look of such stark horror that it congealed the blood in my veins, I realized that I had dragged him from the accursed room a second too late.

He had seen!

THE doctor stared at his listeners.

"Yes, he was dead. Heart failure, they called it."

"That expression on his face," said the landlady with a shudder; "it is like the look on the face of the girl who died there two years ago."

"For God's sake, woman," I cried, "tear that room to pieces! Board it up, lock it away! Never let anyone sleep there again!"

Later, I learned that in the great explosion of 1917, the house was destroyed by fire!

"And now," said the doctor, sucking at his cold pipe, "what about a natural explanation? Is the weird occurrence I have related open to one? In a sense, nothing can be unnatural, and yet... yet..." He tapped the bowl of his pipe on the ash-tray "For twenty years I have studied, pondered, dipped into the almost forgotten lore of ancient mysteries, of the truth behind the fable, and sometimes I think, I believe... that there are stranger things in heaven and earth...."

He paused. "Long ago primitive man was an animal and his sense of smell must have been highly developed. Perhaps through it he cognized another world; a world of subtle sounds and sights; a world just as concrete and real as the one we know; an inimical world. The 'garden,' perhaps, and the devil in the garden." He laughed strangely.

"Perhaps certain odors generated in that room; perhaps the invisible presence there of something alien, incredible, caused Mason (and in a lesser degree, myself) to exercise a faculty the human race, thank God, has long ago outgrown. Perhaps—"

But at sight of his listeners' faces the doctor came to an abrupt stop.

"Ah," he said; "but I see that this explanation is not natural!"

9: The Seed of the Toc-Toc Birds

Astounding Stories, Jan 1932

TALBOT had been working that day, far up in the Catalinas, looking over some mining prospects for his company, and was returning to the Mountain View Hotel in Oracle when, from the mouth of an abandoned shaft some distance back of that town, he saw a strange object emerge.

"Hello," he said to Manuel, his young Mexican assistant, "what the devil can that be?"

Manuel crossed himself swiftly.

"Dios!" he exclaimed, "but it is a queer bird, señor."

Queer, it certainly was, and of a species Talbot had never before laid eyes on. The bird stood on the crumbling rim of the mining shaft and regarded him with golden eyes. Its body was as large as that of a buzzard, and its head had a flat, reptilian look, unpleasant to see. Nor was that the only odd thing. The feathers glittered metallically, like blued copper, and a streak of glistening silver outlined both wings.

Marveling greatly, and deciding that the bird must be some rare kind escaped from a zoo, or a stray from tropical lands much further south, Talbot advanced cautiously, but the bird viewed his approach with unconcern. Ten feet from it he stopped uneasily. The strange fowl's intent look, its utter immobility, somewhat disconcerted him.

"Look out, señor," warned Manuel.

Involuntarily, Talbot stepped back. If he had possessed a rifle he would have shot the bird, but neither Manuel nor himself was armed. Suddenly— he had looked away for a moment— the bird was gone. Clutching a short miner's pick-ax, and a little ashamed of his momentary timidity, he strode to the edge of the abandoned shaft and peered down. There was nothing to see; only rotting joists of wood, crumbling earth for a few feet, and then darkness.

HE pondered for a moment. This was the old Wiley claim. He knew it well. The shaft went down for over two hundred feet, and there were several lateral workings, one of which tunneled back into the hills for a considerable distance. The mine had been a bonanza back in the days when Oracle boomed, but the last ore had been taken out in 1905, and for twenty-seven years it had lain deserted. Manuel came up beside him and leaned over.

"What is that?" he questioned.

Talbot heard it himself, a faint rumbling sound, like the rhythmic throb of machinery. Mystified, he gazed blankly at Manuel. Of course it was impossible. What could functioning machinery be doing at the bottom of an abandoned hole in the ground? And where there were no signs of human activity to account for the phenomenon? A more forsaken looking place it would be hard to imagine. Not that the surrounding country wasn't ruggedly beautiful and grand; the hills were covered with live-oak, yucca grass, chulla, manzanita, and starred with the white blossoms of wild thistle. But this locality was remote from human habitation, and lonely.

Could it be, Talbot wondered, the strange bird making that noise? Or perhaps some animal? The noise sounded like nothing any creature, furred or feathered, could make, but, of course, that must be the explanation. However, it would be dark within the hour, with Oracle still two miles distant, so he turned reluctantly away, Manuel thwacking the burros from the grazing they had found. But that was not to be the end of the odd experience. Just before the trail swung over the next rise, Talbot glanced back. There, perching on the rim of the abandoned mining shaft, were not one but two of the strange birds. As if cognizant of his backward glance, they napped their gleaming, metallic wings, although they did not rise, and gave voice to what could only be their natural harsh cries, measured and, somehow, sinister.

"Toc-toc, toc-toc."

Talbot went to bed determined to investigate the old Wiley claim the next day, but in the morning an urgent telegram called him and Manuel to Phoenix, and so the matter was necessarily postponed. Moreover, on mature reflection, he decided that there was nothing much to investigate. The days went by, the matter slipped his mind, and he had almost forgotten the incident.

IT was an Indian who first brought news of the jungle to Oracle. His name was John Redpath and he wasn't the average person's idea of an Indian at all. He wore store clothes and a wide-brimmed hat, and spoke English with the colloquial ease of one whose native language it was. It was ten o'clock in the morning, the hour when people gathered at the local store and post-office to gossip and get their mail, when he came driving into town in his Ford, his terrified wife and three children crowded into the back seat.

"What's the matter, John?" asked Silby, the constable.

"Matter?" said Redpath. "I'll tell you what's the matter."

He held the attention of the crowd which now began flocking around him. "You know me, Silby; I'm not easily frightened; but what's happened at my place has me scared stiff."

He pulled out a handkerchief and mopped his brow.

"When we went to bed last night, everything looked as usual; but this morning...."

He paused.

"Something over night had grown up in my pasture. Don't ask me what it is. The whole hillside was filled with it. I went to the pasture to milk my goats— that's some distance from the house and over a rise; you know how rugged my land is— and there was the stuff, acres of it, twenty, thirty feet tall, like— like nothing I had ever seen before. And Silby"— his voice was suddenly low— "I could see it growing."

AT this remarkable statement, everyone in sound of his voice gaped with astonishment. Had it been any other Indian they would have said he was drunk— but not John Redpath. He didn't drink.

"Growing?" echoed Silby stupidly.

"Yes. The damn stuff was growing. But it wasn't that which stampeded me out of there. It was the globe."

"The globe!" said Silby, more mystified than ever.

"It was floating over the growing stuff, like a black balloon. Just over my place the balloon began to sift down a shower of pebbles. Like beans, they were; seeds, rather; for when they hit the ground they started to sprout."

"Sprout?" The constable was capable of nothing more than an echo.

"I'm telling you the truth," continued Redpath. "Incredibly fast. I had barely time to crank up the car and get out of there. I never would have done it if the strange growth hadn't left the way clear from the garage to the road. Silby, I had the devil of a time getting the wife and kids out of the house. When I looked back after going a quarter of a mile the house had disappeared under a tangled mass."

There was no time for anyone to question John Redpath further. Even as he finished speaking a large automobile dashed up and out tumbled a well-dressed and portly red-faced stranger.

"What the devil's the matter with the road above here? Funniest thing I ever saw. The road to Mount Lemmon's blocked. My family," he said inconsequentially, "is at Mount Lemmon for the summer and I want to get through to them."

Blocked! The crowd stared at him wonderingly. John Redpath threw in his clutch. "So long," he said. "I've a brother in Tucson, and I'm going to his place until this blows over."

As he left Oracle, John Redpath noticed several dark globes drifting down on it from the hills.

THE first inkling the outside world had of the terrible tragedy that was happening at Oracle came over the phone to Tucson while John Redpath was still en route to that city.

"Hello, hello! Is this the police station? Silby speaking. Silby, town constable at Oracle. For God's sake, send us help! We're being attacked. Yes, attacked from the air. By strange aircraft, round globes, discharging— oh, I don't know what it is; only it grows when it hits the earth. Yes, grows. Oracle is hemmed in. And there are the birds— b-i-r-d-s, birds—"

There was a stifled cry, the voice suddenly ceased, and the wire went dead.

"My God!" said the chief of police of Tucson, "somebody's raving." He lost no time in communicating with the sheriff's office and sending out his men. They soon returned, white-faced and shaken.

"Chief," said the officer in charge of the party, "you know where the road to Oracle switches off the main highway? Well, it's impassable, covered with stuff a hundred feet high."

The chief stared. "Are you crazy?"

"No. Listen. It's the queerest growth you ever saw. Not like vegetation at all. More like twisted metal...."

BUT now the city began to seethe with excitement. Farmers and their families flocked in from the Seep Springs district, and from Jayhnes, telling weird tales of drifting globes and encroaching jungle. The Southern Pacific announced that traffic northward was disrupted. Extras appeared on the streets with shrieking headlines. Everything was in confusion.

A flyer from the local airport flew over Oracle and announced on his return that he could see no signs of the town, that its immediate vicinity was buried under an incredibly tall and tangled mass of vegetation. "From the air it looks like giant stalks of spaghetti, twisted, fantastic," was his description. He went on to say that he noticed quite a few drifting globes and large birds with black, glistening wings, but these offered no hindrance to his flight.

Now the wires hummed with the startling news. All the world was informed of the tragedy. The great cities of the nation stood aghast. An aroused Washington dispatched orders for the aerial forces of the country to proceed to Arizona without delay. The governor of Arizona mobilized the state militia. All border patrol officers proceeded to the area affected. And yet in the face of what was happening they were powerless to do a thing.

At two o'clock of the day following the wiping out of Oracle, the first black globes approached Tucson. They floated down from the north, skirting the granite ridges and foothills of the Catalinas, and were met with a withering hail of lead from anti-aircraft guns, and burst, scattering wide their contents. When

some three hours later the first squadron of the air fleet came to earth on the landing field a few miles south of the city, the northern environs of Tucson, all the area the other side of Speedway, and running east and west as far as the eye could see, was a monstrous jungle a hundred or more feet tall— and still growing.

TERRIFIED residents fled before the uncanny invasion. People congested the streets. Thousands fled from the city in automobiles, and thousands of others thronged the railroad station and bus-line offices seeking for transportation. Rumors ran from lip to lip that Russia was attacking the United States with a newly invented and deadly method of warfare; that it wasn't Russia but Japan, China, England, Germany, a coalition of European and Asiatic powers.

Frantically, the city officials wired railroad companies to send in emergency trains. The mayor appealed to the citizens to be quiet and orderly, not to give way to panic, that everything was being done to insure their safety. Hastily deputized bodies of men were set to patrolling streets and guarding property. Later, martial law was established. The south side of Speedway rapidly assumed the appearance of an armed camp. At the landing field Flight Commander Burns refueled his ships and interviewed the flyer who had flown over Oracle. That worthy shook his head.

"You're going out to fight, Commander," he said, "but God knows what. So far we have been unable to detect any human agency back of those globes. They just drift in, irrespective of how the wind is blowing. So far our only defense has been to shoot them down, but that does little good; it only helps to broadcast their seed. Then, too, the globes shot down have never been examined. Why? Because where they hit a jungle springs up. Sometimes they burst of their own accord. One or two of them got by us in the darkness last night, despite our searchlights, and overwhelmed a company of National Guards."

The flight commander was puzzled.

"Look here," he said, "those globes don't just materialize out of thin air. There must be a base from which they operate. Undoubtedly an enemy is lurking in those mountains." He got up decisively. "If it is humanly possible to locate and destroy that enemy, we shall do it."

FLYING in perfect formation, the bombing squadron clove the air. Looking down, the observers could see the gigantic and mysterious jungle which covered many square miles of country. Like sinuous coils of spaghetti, it looked, and also curiously like vast up-pointed girders of steel and iron. The

rays of the late afternoon sun glinted on this jungle and threw back spears of intense light. Over the iron ridges of the Catalinas the fleet swept at an elevation of several thousand feet. Westward, numerous huge globes could be seen drifting south. The commander signaled a half dozen of his ships to pursue and shoot them down.

In the mountains themselves, there was surprisingly little of the uncanny vegetation. Mile after mile of billowing hills were quartered, but without anything of a suspicious nature being noted. Here and there the observers saw signs of life. Men and women waved at them from isolated homesteads and shacks. At Mount Lemmon the summer colonists appeared unharmed, but in such rugged country it was impossible to think of landing. Oracle, and for a dozen miles around its vicinity, was deserted.

Though the commander searched the landscape thoroughly with his glasses, he could detect the headquarters of no enemies; and yet the existence of the drifting globes would seem to presuppose a sizable base from which they operated. Mystified, he nevertheless subjected the Oracle area to a thorough bombing, and it was while engaged in doing so that he and his men observed a startling phenomenon.

HIGH in the heavens, seemingly out of nothing, the mysterious globes grew. The aviators stared, rubbed their eyes in amazement, doubted the truth of what they saw. Their commander recollected his own words, "Those globes don't just materialize out of thin air." But that actually seemed to be what they were doing. Out of empty space they leaped, appearing first as black spots, and in a moment swelling to their huge proportions.

One pilot made the mistake of ramming a globe, which burst, and he hurtled to earth in a shower of seed, seed which seemed to root and grow and cover his craft with a mass of foliage even as it fell. Horrified, ammunition and explosives exhausted, the amazed commander ordered his ships back to Tucson. What he had to tell caused a sensation.

"No," he said, finishing his report to the high military official who had arrived with federal forces, "I saw nothing— aside from the globes— that could possibly account for the attack. Nothing."

But none the less the attack went on. Though hundreds of planes scoured the sky, though great guns bellowed day and night and thousands of soldiers, state and federal, were under arms, still the incredible globes continued to advance, still more and more of the countryside came under the sway of the nightmarish jungle. And this losing battle was not waged without loss of human life. Sometimes bodies of artillery were cut off by globes getting beyond their lines in the darkness and hemming them in. Then they had

literally to hack their way out or perish; and hundreds of them perished. One company sergeant told of a thrilling race with three globes.

"It was a close thing," he said, scratching his head, "and only a third of us made it."

FEAR gripped the hearts of the most courageous of men. It was terrifying and nerve-racking to face such an unhuman foe— weird, drifting globes and invading jungles whose very source was shrouded in mystery. Against this enemy no weapons seemed to prevail. All the paraphernalia of modern warfare was proving useless. And looking at each other with white faces— not alone in Arizona, but in New York, Chicago, Los Angeles— men asked themselves these questions, and the newspapers posed them:

"What if this thing can't be stopped?"

"What if it keeps on and on and invades every city and state?"

"It is only starting now, but what will it be like a month from now, a year?"

The whole nation awoke to a realization of its danger. The Administration at Washington solemnly addressed itself to the capitals of the world.

"If some power, jealous of the greatness of America, has perfected a new and barbarous weapon of warfare, and without due warning and declaration of hostilities has launched it against us, not only do we denounce such uncivilized procedure, but demand that such a power speak out and reveal to us and the world who our enemy is."

But the powers of the world, as one, united in disclaiming any hand in the monstrous attack being made on the United States. As for that attack, it proceeded inexorably. On the fourth day Tucson was evacuated. Then Winkleman awoke one morning to find that the drifting globes had reached the river. The town was abandoned. California mobilized citizen forces in cooperation with Nevada. The great physicist Miller was said to be frantically at work on a chemical designed to destroy the gigantic growths, specimens of which had been sent him. Such was the condition of affairs when, at Washington, Milton Baxter, the young student, told his incredible story to a still more incredulous Senate.

THE Senate had been sitting in anxious session for five days, and was little inclined to give ear to the stories of cranks. Fortunately for the world, young Baxter came of an influential family and had taken the precaution of having himself introduced by two prominent financiers, who demanded that he be heard.

"Gentlemen," he said earnestly, "contrary to current opinion, America is not being assailed by a foreign power. No! Listen to me a moment and I shall tell you what is attacking America."

He paused and held the assemblage with compelling eyes.

"But first let me explain how I know what I am going to tell you. I was in London when I read of what is occurring in Arizona. Before the wire went dead on him, didn't the unfortunate constable of Oracle say something about birds?"

The senators were silent. "Yes," said a press correspondent at length. "If I remember correctly, he said, 'And there are the birds— b-i-r-d-s, birds.' "

"Well," exclaimed Senator Huffy, "the man was pretty well excited and his words may have been misunderstood. What the devil have birds to do with those globes and jungles?"

"More than you think," replied Baxter. "Listen!" He fixed their attention with uplifted hand. "The thing I have to reveal is of such paramount importance that I must not be interrupted. You must bear with me while I go back some months and even years in time to make myself understood.

"You all remember the mysterious disappearance of Professor Reubens. Yes, I see that you do. It caused a sensation. He was the foremost scientist in the country— it would not be exaggerating too much to say in the world. His name was not as well known among the masses as that of Miller and Dean; in fact, outside of an exclusive circle it wasn't known at all, but ask any scientist about Reubens. He was a tall, dour man of sixty, with Scotch blood in his veins, and was content to teach a class in a college because of the leisure it afforded him for his own research work. That was at the University of Arizona in Tucson.

"The faculty of the college was proud to have him on its staff and provided him with a wooden building back of the campus, for a private laboratory and workshop. I understand that the Rockefeller Institute contributed funds towards Professor Reubens' experiments, but I am not certain.

"AT any rate he had a wonderfully well equipped place. I was a pupil at the University and attended his class in physics. A strong friendship grew up between us. How can I explain that friendship? I was not a particularly brilliant student, but he had few friends and perhaps my boyish admiration pleased him. I think, too, that he was lonely, heart-hungry for affection. His wife was dead, and his own boy.... But I won't go into that.

"Suffice it to say that I believe he bestowed on me some of the affection he had felt for his dead son. Indeed I am sure he did. Be that as it may, I often visited him in his laboratory and watched, fascinated, as he pored over some of

his intricate apparatus. In a vague way, I knew that he was seeking to delve more deeply into the atom.

" 'Before Leeuwenhoek invented the microscope,' the Professor once said, 'who ever dreamed of the life in a drop of water? What is needed now is a super-microscope to view the atom.'

"The idea thrilled me.

" 'Do you believe, sir, that an instrument will ever be invented that will do that?'

" 'Yes. Why not? I am working on some such device myself. Of course the whole thing has to be radically different. The present, method of deducing the atom by indirection is very unsatisfactory. We can know nothing for certain until direct observation is possible. The atomic theory that likens the atom to our solar system, with planets revolving round a central nucleus, is very interesting. But I shall never be content, for one, until I can see such an atomic system in operation.'

"Now I had every admiration for the capacity and genius of my teacher, but I couldn't forebear exclaiming:

" 'Is that possible?'

" 'Of course it's possible,' he cried irritably. 'Do you think I should be pursuing my experiments if I didn't think it possible? Only numbskulls think anything impossible!'

"I FELT rather hurt at his retort and a certain coolness sprang up between us. The summer holidays came and I went away without bidding him good-by. But returning for the new semester, my first act was to hurry to the laboratory. He greeted me as if there had never been any difference between us.

" 'Come,' he cried; 'you must see what I have accomplished. It is marvelous, marvelous.'

"In his workshop stood a mechanism perhaps three feet square and four feet high. It was made of polished steel and looked not unlike an Edison music box.

" 'You are the first I have shown it to,' he said excitedly. 'Here, look into this.'

"Stooping over the top of the box I peered into the eye-piece indicated. It was so fashioned that it fitted the contour of the face snugly.

" 'Now hold steady,' warned the Professor. 'This machine makes quite a noise, but it won't harm you at all.'

"I sensed that he was fingering and arranging dials and levers on the side of the contrivance. Suddenly an engine in the box began to throb with a steady

rhythm. This gradually increased in tempo until the vibration of it shook the room.

" 'Don't move,' shouted the Professor.

"At first I could see nothing. Everything was intensely dark. Then the darkness began to clarify. Or rather I should say it seemed as if the darkness increased to such a pitch that it became— oh, I can't describe it! But of a sudden I had the sensation of looking into the utter bleakness and desolation of interstellar space. Coldness, emptiness— that was the feeling. And in this coldness and emptiness flamed a distant sun, around which twelve darker bodies the size of peas revolved. They revolved in various ellipses. And far off— millions of light years away (the thought came to me involuntarily at the time)— I could glimpse infinitesimal specks of light, a myriad of them. With a cry I jerked back my head.

" 'That,' shouted the Professor in my ear, 'was an atomic universe.'

"IT never entered my head to doubt him. The realness, the vividness, the overwhelming loneliness and vastness of the sight I had seen— yes, and the suggestion of cosmic grandeur and aloofness that was conveyed— banished any other feeling but that of belief.

" 'Inside that box,' said Professor Reubens quietly, 'and directly underneath the special crystal-ray medium I have perfected, is a piece of matter no larger than a pin-head. But viewed through the magnifying medium of the crystal-ray that insignificant piece of matter becomes as vast and as empty as all space, and in that space you saw— an atomic system.'

"An atomic system! Imagine my emotions. The tremendousness of the assertion took away my breath. I could only seize the Professor's hand and hold to it tightly.

" 'Softly, my boy, softly,' he said, smiling at my emotion. 'What you have seen is but the least part of the invention. There is more to it than that.'

" 'More?'

" 'Yes. Did you think I would be content with merely viewing at a distance? No. Consider that revolving round a central nucleus similar to our sun are twelve planets, any one of which may be inhabited by intelligent creatures.'

"I stared at him dumbly.

" 'You mean— '

" 'Why not? Size is only relative. Besides in this case I can demonstrate. Please look again.'

"Not without trepidation, I did as he bade. Once more I saw the black emptiness of atomic space, saw the blazing nucleus with its whirling satellites. Above the roaring noise of the machine came Professor Reubens' voice. 'I am

now intensifying the magnifying medium and focusing it on one of the planets you see. The magnifying crystal-ray is mounted on a revolving device which follows this particular planet in its orbit. Now... now....'

"I GAZED, enthralled. Only one atomic planet— the size of a pea and seemingly motionless in space— now lay in my field of vision. And this planet began to grow, to expand, until beneath my staring eyes it looked like the full moon in all its glory.

" 'I am gradually increasing the magnifying power of the crystal-ray,' came the voice of the Professor.

"The huge mass of the planet filled the sub-atomic sky. My hands gripped the rim of the box with excitement. On its surface began to form continents, seas. Good God! was all this really materializing from a speck of matter under the lens of a super-microscope? I was looking down from an immense height upon an ever clarifying panorama. Mountains began to unfold, plains, and suddenly beneath me appeared a mighty city. I was too far away to see it distinctly, but it was no city such as we have on earth. And yet it was magnificent; it was like gazing at a strange civilization.

"Dimly I could see great machines laboring and sending forth glowing streamers of light. Strange buildings rose. It was all bizarre, bewildering, unbelievably weird. What creatures dwelt in this place? I strained my eyes, strove to press forward, and in that very moment the things at which I gazed seemed to rise swiftly to meet my descending head. The illusion was that of plunging earthward at breakneck speed. With a stifled cry, I recoiled, rubbed my blinking eyes, and found myself staring stupidly into the face of Professor Reubens. He shut off the machine and regarded me thoughtfully.

" 'In that atomic universe, on a planet swinging round a sub-atomic sun, the all of which lies somewhere in a speck of our matter, intelligent creatures dwell and have created a great machine civilization. And Baxter,' he leaned forward and fixed me with eyes that gleamed from under heavy brows, 'not only has my super-atomic-microscope revealed somewhat of that world and its marvels to human vision, but it has opened up another, a more wonderful possibility.'

"HE did not tell me what this wonderful possibility was, and a few minutes later I left the laboratory, intending to return after a late class. But a telegram from Phoenix was at my rooms, calling me home. My father was seriously ill. It was June before he recovered his health. Consequently I had to forego college until the next season.

" 'Old Reubens is going dotty,' said one of my classmates to me. Rather disturbed, I sought him out. I saw that there were dark circles of sleeplessness under his eyes and that his face had grown thinner. Somewhat diffidently I questioned him about his experiments. He answered slowly:

"'You will recollect my telling you that the super-atomic-microscope had opened up another wonderful possibility?'

"I nodded, sharply curious now.

" 'Look.'

"He led the way into his workshop. The super-atomic-microscope, I noticed, had been altered almost out of recognition. It is hopeless for me to attempt describing those changes, but midway along one side of its length projected a flat surface like a desk, with a large funnel-shaped device resting on it. The big end of this funnel pointed towards a square screen set against the wall, a curious screen superimposed on what appeared to be a background of frosted glass.

" 'This,' said the Professor, laying one hand on the funnel and indicating the screen with the other, 'is part of the arrangement with which I have established communication with the world in the atom.

" 'No,' he said, rightly interpreting my exclamation, 'I am not crazy. For months I have been exchanging messages with the inhabitants of that world. You know the wave and corpuscular theories of light? Both are correct, but in a higher synthesis— But I won't go into that. Suffice it to say that I broke through the seemingly insuperable barrier hemming in the atomic world and made myself known. But I see that you still doubt my assertion. Very well, I will give you a demonstration. Keep your eyes on the screen— so—'

"ADJUSTING what seemed a radio headpiece to my ears, he seated himself at a complicated control-board. Motors purred, lights flashed, every filament of the screen became alive with strange fires. The frosted glass melted into an infinity of rose-colored distance. Far off, in the exact center of this rosy distance appeared a black spot. Despite the headpiece, I could hear the Professor talking to himself, manipulating dials and levers. The black spot grew, it advanced, it took on form and substance; and then I stared, I gasped, for suddenly I was gazing into a vast laboratory, but depicted on a miniature scale.

"But it wasn't this laboratory which riveted my attention. No. It was the unexpected creature that perched in the midst of it and seemed to look into my face with unwinking eyes of gold set in a flat reptilian head. This creature moved; its feathers gleamed metallically; I saw its bill open and shut. Distinctly through the ear-phones came a harsh sound, a sound I can only describe by

the words toc-toc, toc-toc. Then, just as the picture had appeared, it faded, the lights went out, the purring of the motors ceased.

" 'Yes,' said the Professor, stepping to my side and removing the headpiece, 'the inhabitants of the sub-atomic planet are birds.'

"I could only stare at him dumbly.

" 'I see that astounds you. You are thinking that they lack hands and other characteristics of the genus homo. But perhaps certain faculties of manipulation take their place. At any rate those birds are intelligent beings; in some respects, further advanced in science than are we ourselves. Perhaps it would be more exact to say that their scientific investigations and achievements have been along slightly different lines. If such messages I sent them had come to our world from another planet or dimension, how readily they might have been misconstrued, ridiculed or ignored.' The Professor shrugged his shoulders. 'But the beings in this sub-atomic world interpreted my communications without difficulty.

"IN no time we were conversing with one another through means of a simplified code. I was soon given to understand that their scientists and philosophers had long recognized the fact that their universe was but an atom in an immeasurably greater dimension of existence; yes, and had long been trying to establish contact with it.' The Professor's voice fell. 'And not that alone: they were eager to cooperate with me in perfecting a method of passing from their world to ours!

" 'Yes,' he cried, 'much of what I have accomplished has been under their advice and guidance; and they on their part have labored; until now'— his eyes suddenly blazed into my fascinated face— 'until now, after months of intensive work and experiment, success is nigh, and any day may see the door opened and one of them come through!'

"Gentlemen!" cried Milton Baxter, "what more is there to say? I staggered from Professor Reubens' laboratory that afternoon, my head in a whirl. That was on a Monday.

" 'Come back Thursday,' he said.

"But as you know, Professor Reubens disappeared on a Wednesday night before; and stranger still, his machines disappeared with him. In his laboratory were signs of a struggle, and bloodstains were found. The police suspected me of a guilty knowledge of his whereabouts, in short of having made away with my friend. When I told somewhat of the experiments he had been engaged in, spoke of the missing inventions, they thought I was lying. Horrified at the suspicion leveled at myself, I finally left Tucson and went abroad. Months passed; and during all those months I pondered the mystery of the Professor's

fate, and the fate of his machines. But my fevered brain could offer no solution until I read of what was happening in Arizona; then, then...."

Milton Baxter leaned forward, his voice broke.

"Then," he cried, "then I understood! Professor Reubens had succeeded in his last experiment. He had opened the door to earth for the bird intelligences from the atom and they had come through and slain him and spirited away his machines and established them in a secret place!

"God help us," cried Milton Baxter, "there can be but one conclusion to draw. They are waging war against us with their own hideous methods of warfare; they have set out to conquer earth!"

SUCH was the amazing story Milton Baxter told the Senate, but that body placed little credence in it. In times of stress and disaster cranks and men of vivid imaginations and little mental stability inevitably spring up. But the Washington correspondents wired the story to their papers and the Associated Press broadcast it to the four winds.

Talbot had just returned to Phoenix from New Mexico. He had been out of touch with civilization and newspapers and it was with a feeling of stunned amazement that he learned of the evacuation of Tucson and Winkleman and the wiping out of Oracle. Reading Milton Baxter's incredible story he leapt to his feet with an oath. Toc-toc! Why, that was the sound the strange birds had uttered in the hills back of Oracle. And there was the noise of machinery coming from the old shaft.

Full of excitement he lost no time in seeking an interview with the military commander whose headquarters were located in Phoenix and related to him what Manuel and himself had witnessed and heard that day at the abandoned mine. Manuel corroborated his tale. The commander was more than troubled and doubtful.

"God knows we cannot afford to pass up an opportunity of wiping out the enemy. If you will indicate on a map where the old shaft is we will bomb it from the air."

But Talbot shook his head.

"Your planes would have a tough job hitting a spot as small as that from the air. Besides, a direct hit might only close up the shaft and not destroy the workings underground. If the enemy be the creatures Milton Baxter says they are, what is to prevent them from digging their way out and resuming the attack?"

"Then we will land troops in there somehow and overwhelm them with— "

Talbot interrupted. "Pardon me, General, but the enemy would have no difficulty in spotting such a maneuver. What chance would your soldiers have

against a shower of jungle seed? You would only be sending them to destruction. No, the only way is for someone familiar with those old underground diggings to enter them, locate the birds and the machines and blow them up."

"But who—"

"Myself. Listen. This is the plan. About five years ago my company mined for copper and other ores about a half mile above the Wiley claim. I was in charge of operations. That is how I know the ground so well. One of our northern leads broke through into a tunnel of the abandoned mine. When copper prices were shot to hell in the depression of 1930 we quit taking out ore; but when I went through the place eighteen months ago it was still possible to crawl from one mine to another. Of course earth and rock may have fallen since then, but I don't believe the way is yet blocked. If I were dropped in that vicinity at night with another man and the necessary tools and explosives...."

The general thought swiftly.

"An auto-gyroscope could land you all right. There's one here now. But what about the second man to accompany you?"

Manuel said quickly, "I'm going with the boss."

"You, Manuel," Talbot said roughly. "Don't be a fool. If anything should happen to me— well, I've lived my life; but you're only a kid."

Manuel's face set stubbornly. "An experienced mining man you need, is it not? In case there should be difficulties. And I am experienced. Besides, señores," he said simply, "my wife and child are somewhere in those mountains ... above Oracle...."

Talbot gripped his hand in quick sympathy. "All right, Manuel; come if you like."

A MOONLESS sky hung above them as they swung over the dark and jungle-engulfed deserted city of Tucson, a sky blazing with the clarity of desert stars, and to the south and west shot through with the beams of great searchlights. Flying at a lofty altitude to avoid contact with drifting globes or betrayal of their coming with no lights showing aboard their craft save those carefully screened and focused on the instrument board, it was hard to realize that the fate of America, perhaps of the world, hung on the efforts of two puny individuals.

Everything seemed unreal, ghost-like, and suddenly the strangeness of it all came over Talbot and he felt afraid. The noiseless engine made scarcely a sound; the distant rumble of gunfire sounded like low and muttering thunder.

They had come by way of Tucson so as to pick up a ten-gallon tube of concentrated explosive gas at the military camp in the Tucson mountains.

"This gas," the general had assured them, "has been secretly developed by the chemical branch of the War Department and is more powerful than TNT or nitro-glycerin. It is odorless, harmless to breathe and exploded by a wireless-radio device."

He had showed them how to manipulate the radio device, and explained that in the metal tube was a tiny chamber from which gas could not escape, and a receiving-detonating cap. "If you can introduce the tube into the underground galleries where you suspect the enemy's headquarters to be, allow the contents to escape for ten minutes, and a mile distant you can blow the mine and all in it to destruction. And you needn't be afraid of anything escaping alive," he had added grimly.

TALBOT thought of his words as the dark and silent world slid by. He glanced at the luminous dial of his wrist-watch. Eleven-fifteen. The moon rose at eleven-twenty-four. He studied the map. High over Mount Lemmon the craft soared. He touched the army pilot's arm. "All right," he said, "throttle her down." Their speed decreased. "Lower."

Swiftly they sank, until the dark bulk of hills and trees lay blackly beneath; so near as to seem within the touch of a hand. Though he strained his ears, no alien sound came wafting upward. "Keep circling here," he directed the pilot. "The moon'll be up in a minute and then we can be sure of where we are." The pilot nodded. He was a phlegmatic young man. Not once during the trip had he uttered a word.

The east glowed as if with red fire. Many a time before had Talbot watched the moon rise, but never under stranger circumstances. Now the night was illuminated with mellow glory. "Hit the nail on the head," he whispered. "Do you see that spot over there? To the left, yes. Can you land us there?"

Without a word the pilot swung for the clearance. It was a close thing, requiring delicate maneuvering, and only an auto-gyroscope could have made it without crashing. Hurriedly Manuel and Talbot unloaded their gear.

"All right," said Talbot to the pilot. "No need to wait for us. If we are successful, we'll send out the wireless signal agreed on, and if we aren't...." He shrugged his shoulders. "But tell the General to be sure and allow us the time stipulated on before undertaking another attack."

STANDING there on the bleak hillside, watching the auto-gyroscope run ahead for a few yards and then take the air, Talbot experienced a feeling of desolation. Now he and Manuel were alone, cut off from their own kind by

barriers of impregnable jungle. And yet on that lonely hillside there were no signs of an enemy. For a moment he wondered if he weren't asleep, dreaming; if he wouldn't soon awake to find that all this was nothing but a nightmare.

But Manuel gathering up the tools aroused him from such thoughts. Not without difficulty were the necessary things conveyed to the abandoned mine back of the old Wiley claim. Their course lay along the bottom of a dry creek, over a ridge, and so to the shaft half-way down the side of a hill. A second trip had to be made to bring the gas tube.

It was two o'clock in the morning when Manuel stood at the foot of the four-hundred-foot hole and signaled up that the air was good. Talbot lowered the tools to him, and the gas container, and lastly went down himself. As already stated, Talbot had explored the underground workings of the mine not eighteen months before. Picking out the main tunnel and keeping a close watch for rattlers with electric torches, the two men went cautiously ahead. In places earth had fallen and had to be cleared away, but the formation for the most part was a soft rock and shale. They went slowly, for fear of starting slides.

At a spot taking an abrupt turn— and it was here that the newer tunnel had broken through into the older gallery of the Wiley claim— Manuel caught swiftly at Talbot's arm. "What is that?" To straining ears came the unmistakable throb of machinery. They snapped off their torches and crouched in Stygian darkness. Not a ray of light was to be seen. Talbot knew that in following the ore stratum, the Wiley gallery took several twists. Laboriously he and Manuel advanced with the gas tube. It was stiflingly close. He counted the turns, one, two, three. Now the roar of machinery was a steady reverberation that shook the tunnel. He whispered to Manuel:

"Go back and wait for me at the mouth of the shaft. Only one of us must risk taking the gas tube any nearer the enemy. Here, take my watch. It is now two-forty-five. If I don't rejoin you by four o'clock touch off the explosive."

Manuel started to protest. "Do as I say," commanded Talbot. "The fate of the world is at stake. Give me an hour; but no longer— remember!"

LEFT alone in the clammy darkness Talbot wiped the sweat from his face. Grabbing one end of the rope sling in which the tube was fastened, he pulled it ahead. There was a certain amount of unavoidable noise; rock rattled, earth fell; but he reasoned shrewdly enough that the roar of the machinery would drown this. Beyond a crevice created by a cave-in he saw an intense light play weirdly. He squirmed through the crevice and pulled the tube after him.

His mind reconstructed the mine ahead. He recollected that when the lead of this mine had petered out, the owners had begun to sink the shaft deeper

into the earth before abandoning the mine. This meant that the foot of the shaft, with the addition of an encroaching twenty feet of the southern gallery, was deeper by some several yards than the floor of the tunnel in which he stood. Here was the logical place to set the gas tube, nose pointed ahead.

With trembling fingers he loosened the screwed-in nose of the tube with a wrench. A slight hiss told of the deadly gas's escape. It would inevitably flow towards the shaft, drawn by the slight suction of machinery, following the easiest direction of expansion. Now Talbot's work was done, and if he had immediately retreated all would have been well, but the weird light fascinated him. Here he was, one man in the bowels of earth pitting his strength, his ingenuity against something incredible, unbelievable. Beings from an atomic universe, from a world buried within the atom; beings attacking his own earth with uncanny methods of destruction. Oh, it was impossible, absurd, but he must look at them, he must see.

Scarcely daring to breathe, he squirmed, he crawled, and suddenly he saw. He was looking down into an underground crypt flooded with brilliant light. That crypt had been altered out of all recognition, its greater expanse of roof supported with massive pillars, the light screened away from the shaft. But it was not all this which riveted his staring eyes. No— it was the machines; strange, twisted things, glowing, pulsing, and— in the light of his knowledge— menacing and sinister.

TALBOT gasped. Almost at once he observed the birds, twelve of them, two standing in front of what appeared to be a great square of polished crystal, wearing metal caps and goggles, heads cocked forward intently. The others also perched in front of odd machines like graven images. That was the uncanny thing about the birds: they appeared to be doing nothing. Only the occasional jerk of a head, the filming of a hard golden eye, gave them a semblance of life. But, none the less, there could be no mistaking the fact that they were the guiding, the directing geniuses back of all the pulsing, throbbing mechanisms.

Half mesmerized by the sight, forgetful of time and place, Talbot leaned forward in awe. There was a great funnel, a shallow cabinet, and out of the cabinet poured an intense reddish beam, and out of the beam....

It was a minute before he understood, and then comprehension came to him. Those dark spots shooting from the cabinet, no larger than peas, were the mysterious drifting globes whose scattered seed was fast covering miles of Arizonian soil with impenetrable jungle. From a universe in a piece of matter no larger than a pin-head, from a sub-atomic world, the weapons of an alien

intelligence were ruthlessly being hurled against man, to conquer, to destroy him.

And now it was made plain to him why the drifting globes had seemed to materialize out of thin air. Being infinitesimally small parts of an atom, these globes were released from the cabinet and soon assumed the size of peas; they were guided across the crypt, up the old Wiley shaft, and high in the air, somewhere in space, enlarged to immense proportions. How? Talbot could not guess. By some manipulation of science and machinery beyond that of earth.

Engrossed, he moved an inch forward, craned his head, and in that moment it happened. Beneath his weight a section of earth and rock crumbled, cracked, slid forward, and he plunged headlong to the floor below, striking his skull with stunning force!

HE came to himself, staring up into the dour-looking face of a tall man. He recollected pitching forward among the birds and the machines. But the birds and the machines had disappeared and he was lying in an odd room without windows but lit with a soft radiance. Bewildered, he sat up.

"Who are you?" he demanded.

The man's beard looked straggly, untrimmed.

"My name," he said, "is Reubens— Professor Reubens."

Professor Reubens! Talbot gasped. "Not the scientist who disappeared?"

"Yes— as you've disappeared."

"What!"

"Through the machine."

It was a moment before Talbot understood. "You mean...."

"That you are a prisoner in a sub-atomic world."

Talbot now realized with startling clearness what had happened to him. When he had fallen into the crypt the weird birds had directly placed him in the cabinet and transported him to their own world. In other words, he and Reubens and everything he saw about him were infinitely small creatures in an atom-world. He and the Professor were trapped! And when Manuel blew up the only means of return....

"How long have I been here?" Talbot asked hoarsely.

"Five minutes at the most."

Then, at the shortest, the way to earth would exist twenty minutes longer. Twenty minutes.... Incoherently he told Reubens of what had happened in Arizona since his disappearance, of his own misadventure.

"Aye," said the Professor, "I knew as much. Nor do these inhuman birds intend stopping with the use of seed globes. More devilish weapons than that they plan using against earth. Oh, they are fiends, fiends! Already have they

wiped out civilization and intelligent life on other planets in this sub-atomic system and introduced their own."

HE stopped, shuddering. "Nor is it to be wondered at that no birds were seen after the first attack on Oracle," he went on. "They do not fight in person, as do we ourselves, but through proxy, directing machines from centers of control. In powers of destruction, they are immeasurably ahead of man. Thank God you discovered their headquarters in the deserted mine and have spread the gas for its destruction. But the rage of the birds at such a defeat will be terrible. They will undoubtedly torture me in an effort to make me reveal the basis of my invention so that they can resume the attack on earth. So we must escape."

"But how— where?"

"I have thought that out. It is one chance in a thousand. Undoubtedly we will be killed. But that is better than being tortured or living in this world. Look."

He held up a pearl-handled pen-knife. "The birds are smart, all right, but they don't quite understand clothes, wearing none themselves. They found your revolver, but overlooked this."

"Of what good is it?"

"To cut our way out of this cell."

Talbot laughed incredulously. The walls of the room were smooth, and hard to the touch. "They're as solid as concrete," he said.

"But cut like cheese under a steel blade. I found that out. Watch."

To Talbot's amazement the point of the penknife sank into the wall and in a moment a section of it was gouged out. The professor said tensely, "I've been months in this place, been taken back and forth, and know the lay of the land. This room is in a great building that houses the laboratory from which the attack against earth is being launched. Would you believe it, only the great scientist who picked up my messages and helped me perfect my invention, and a few of his assistants, are concerned in that attack, and they will be congregated at the machines. Follow me, and whatever I command, do it promptly."

THE Professor had been working feverishly as he spoke, and now he and Talbot crawled through the hole he had made in the wall and found themselves in a long gloomy corridor. "Quick," Reubens whispered.

They darted down the passageway. Talbot had only time to see that the gleaming sides of the corridor were beveled and etched with strange designs, before they came to its end and where a curious device like a huge five-

pointed star was revolving noiselessly, half sunk in a great hole in the floor. Without hesitation the Professor stepped onto one of the flat-tipped star-points as it came level with where they stood and Talbot did the same. Up, turned the star-point, to a dizzy height, and over, but the tip swung on ball-bearings, maintaining its passengers in a perpendicular position, and from its highest point of elevation descended to another floor far below, where they disembarked.

The huge revolving star-wheel was nothing but an ingenious movable staircase. But the Professor gave Talbot no time to marvel, nor did the latter try to linger. The corridor below was wider, more richly beveled and carved, and the statue of an heroic bird stood perched in the center of it. The lighting was soft and mellow, but Talbot could perceive no windows or globes. Suddenly from an open doorway hopped a bird. There was no chance to avoid it. Its wings were spread and from its parted bill came a harsh cry, "Toc-toc, toc-toc!"

KNIFE in one hand, the Professor hurled himself forward and caught the bird in the grip of the other. Instantly from the doorway sprang a monstrous mechanism on stilts, flexible tentacles of metal reaching out and wrapping themselves around the Professor. Talbot leaped to the Professor's assistance. The mechanism fought like a live thing. In vain he strove to wrench the tentacles free of the Professor. One of them lashed out and took him by the thighs in a crushing grasp. But the Professor had the bird by the throat. Both of his hands were free. Back, he forced its head, back. The mechanism seemed to falter in the attack, as if bewildered. Across the exposed throat the Professor drew the gleaming blade. Flesh, tendons and arteries gave, blood spurted, and in the same moment the tentacles fell away from Talbot and the Professor and withdrew with a dull clang. The Professor released the bird and it dropped to the floor.

"It is the birds' mentality that directs those mechanisms," said the Professor, pointing to the now harmless machine.

Apparently the brief but terrific battle had passed unnoticed, no alarm being given. Now the corridor twisted. The two men came to where a deep well was sunk in the floor. To one side a star-wheel revolved smoothly. Out of the depths came the steady throb of machinery. Cautiously peering over the edge, Talbot saw a sight he would never forget.

HE did not need the Professor's whispered words to tell him that here was the source of the deadly attack being waged against earth. Motionless birds perched in front of bizarre machines; lights waxed and waned; a cannon-like

device, or funnel, shot a column of light into a screen, and through the column of light moved a steady procession of round objects the size of plums.

"The drifting globes being shot through to earth," whispered the Professor, "and our only hope. Listen, the birds are intent on their machines, their backs to the star-wheel. We will descend, throw ourselves into the column of light, seize hold of a globe, and...."

He did not need to finish. Talbot understood in a flash. They would be dragged to their own world by the weapons hurled at it.

"Of course that column of light may kill us," went on the Professor tensely. "Or we may be blown up on the other side. Your Mexican friend hasn't touched off that explosive gas yet, because— But we've not a moment to lose. Follow me."

The tip of the star-wheel went up, over, descended. The blood was roaring in Talbot's ears. "Now!" hissed the Professor. "Now!" Together they rushed forward. Talbot's foot slipped. The heart leaped into his throat. He never remembered reaching the column of light; but suddenly he was in it, blinded, dazed. His clutching hands closed on something small and hard.

The laboratory was a pinwheel going round and round. Through a sea of darkness he floated. A distant glow grew, expanded, became the crypt in the old Wiley mine. A moment he glimpsed the gleaming pillars, the pulsing machines, the startled birds, and then— Oh, it was incredible, impossible, but the dark, crumbling walls of the old shaft were around him; the globe in his hand no larger than a pea was lifting him towards life and safety.

He wanted to shout, to sing, but even as the pale stars fell athwart his upturned face, even as the cool mountain air smote his fevered brow, the dark earth erupted beneath his feet, a whirlwind of smoke and wind beat and buffeted him, and, in the midst of an overwhelming noise, consciousness was blotted out!

It was bright daylight when Talbot regained his senses. Propped against a great rock the Professor regarded him whimsically. Reubens looked badly bruised and battered; one arm hung loosely at his side. Talbot's head ached and he knew that a leg was broken.

"Yes," said the Professor, "we got through just in time— a few seconds before the explosive gas was touched off. Thank God, my invention has been destroyed. The world is safe."

Yes, the world was safe. Talbot sank back with a sigh of relief. Overhead a white plane was dipping toward earth.

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10: By the Hands of the Dead

Strange Tales of Mystery And Terror, March 1932

"I BELIEVE," said Porter Norton to me, "that you should tell the story as a warning to those dreamers and madmen who would dare to knock at the very portals of death and question the grim guardian of the beyond."

Perhaps Norton is right. Perhaps the terrible fate of Peter Strong was incurred because he came near to rending the veil betwixt life and death, and no man can do that and live. But I do not quite believe this. I believe....

But let me tell the story; let me put the weird, incredible facts on paper and in the end you shall know what I believe.

Norton and I met Peter Strong at one of Mrs. Tibbet's Sunday night gatherings. Mrs. Tibbet was a charming old lady who believed in spiritualism A spiritualist society held weekly meetings at her parlors and one saw some inexplicable things there. One night a medium— a big, fleshy woman who resembled pictures of Madame Blavatzky— gave a rather disturbing performance. The room was darkened as usual, but a veiled globe threw a faint light upon an area of floor in our midst.

We sat in a half circle, facing the cabinet, and holding hands. Suddenly the curtains of the cabinet parted and something came into the room, something abnormally broad and squat. All this time the sound of heavy breathing and occasional cries as if of pain, came from the cabinet. The thing which now undulated across the floor could not possibly be the medium, and I watched with a prickling sensation of the scalp until it reached the illuminated area. In the blacker portions of the room it had been distinguishable only as a luminous mass; but now it showed like white smoke, wreathing and churning. I felt Norton, who sat next to me, stiffen in his chair, and at that moment a woman screamed and someone snapped on the lights. The smoke vanished:

"Fake, of course," I said with a nervous laugh.

NORTON nodded his head doubtfully; but the gentleman who had sat on my right, a man I had seen at the meetings for the first time, shook his head.

"No," he said quietly, "that wasn't a fake, that was one of the odd times when Mrs. Powers had enough psychic units of electricity focused in herself to allow the materialization of matter plain enough to be seen."

I looked at the man with interest. He was of average height, slim and precise looking. His face was clean shaven, that of an ascetic, a scholar; he had a high forehead and wide gray eyes— the eyes of a mystic.

His age I judged to be fifty-five or sixty.

At that moment Mrs. Tibbet bustled up. "This," she said, putting her arm around the shoulders of the man, "is a very dear friend of mine, and I want you to meet him. His name is Strong— Peter Strong."

We shook hands. "You mustn't judge spiritualism," he said with a smile, "by its religious or fortunetelling aspects. As a matter of fact, the science of spiritualism has nothing to do with religion."

"The science?" said Norton.

"Yes, the science. Nothing is more exact than astronomy to-day, yet it had its roots in astrology. What you see in the spiritualist societies throughout the world, the mediums and their like, is but the primitive foundations of scientific spiritualism. It is full of quackery and fraud, just as astrology was and still is full of quackery and fraud.." He gave us his card. "If you should ever care to call on me," he said, "I would be delighted to discuss the subject further."

SEVERAL months passed, however, before we took advantage of that invitation. Mrs. Tibbet went to White Horse Canyon for the summer, and the meetings at her parlors discontinued; but except for week-end trips to Oracle, Norton and I were confined to the city. Norton as city editor of the **Gazette**, and I as its circulation manager, had enough to keep us busy.

One hot August afternoon when the mercury registered a hundredfour in the shade and the office was a sizzling furnace, Norton poked his head into my sanctum and waved a sticky proof. "Read this," he commanded.

I took the strip listlessly. "Tucson inventor makes machine for raising spirits," I read. "Peter Strong, local scholar and psychic research worker, announces."

I looked up at Norton with quickened interest. "Why, this must be the fellow we met at Mrs. Tibbet's."

"I am sure it is. What do you say if we run around and see him after dinner? Might be a story in it for the paper."

I assented; and that was how we came to meet Peter Strong again and to undergo the harrowing experiences set down here.

The house was an old one, set in the southwest part of town, a two-story rambling pile built of adobe and surrounded by overgrown gardens and a stone fence. The immediate neighborhood was given over to other large houses and substantial estates; yet we approached it through the squalid Mexican quarter where dark-skinned, exoticlooking men and women gossiped or smoked in

doorways, and dirty ragged children with vivid eyes and shrill cries rolled on the sidewalks and in the gutters.

As he carefully piloted the Ford, Norton told me something of Peter Strong. "I looked him up in our private morgue," he said, "and questioned the managing editor. Strong belongs to one of the oldest families in these parts. His grandfather was United States marshal hereabouts in the old days when Tucson was nothing but a cow town; and his father used to be mayor about twenty years back, before his death. Quite wealthy, I understand, but most of the family fortune was lost in the 1913-14 business slump. At that, the present Strong, the one we're going to see, isn't povertystricken. Lives very quietly, though, and seldom goes into society. Lived abroad for years. Wife dead. Is considered an authority on psychical phenomena and generally held to be a bit queer."

AS everyone who has lived in Tucson knows, the street lights are sparsely scattered. With some difficulty we located the desired estate and drove up a wide drive through a thick row of pepper and palm trees. The wide veranda was deserted, but the heavy front door was open, and even the screen door was flung back to admit more readily the faintly stirring evening breeze.

As Norton raised his hand to sound the brass knocker, a woman came down the stairs from the upper part of the house. She came from obscurity into the rather faint light cast by an overhead bulb in a colored shade, and I could not see her distinctly save to note the fact that she was tall and slender and clad in a skirt that reached to the floor. The woman paused at seeing us.

We both doffed our hats. "Is Mr. Strong in?" asked Norton. She did not reply, but instead beckoned us forward, and glided down the long hall, glancing over her shoulder to see if we followed. We started to do so, but at that moment a door at the end of the corridor opened, flooding it with light, and an elderly man in the quiet garb of a gentleman's servant faced us. The woman, we were both surprised to observe, had disappeared. "I beg your pardon," said Norton, in answer to the servant's suspicious looks, "but we are here to see Mr. Strong. We would have sounded the knocker, of course, but the lady—"

"The lady!" said the man, his expression subtly altering.

"Why, yes," replied Norton. "She invited us in. We would scarcely have entered otherwise. I don't know where," he said, looking about perplexedly, "she could have gone to."

The man made no reply but went to announce our presence to his master, and in a few minutes Peter Strong greeted us warmly. "This basement room," he said, leading the way to it, "is my study and workroom."

IT was a large place, and despite its cement floor, was comfortably enough furnished with rugs, easy-chairs and pictures, the one incongruous note being a work-bench set against the rear wall on which a variety of tools, odds and ends of wire, and other articles lay scattered.

"Yes," said Peter Strong, "I recollect meeting you at Mrs. Tibbet's very well. Michael," he called to the servant, "bring us something cooling to drink, will you? It's only an iced fruit beverage," he apologized, "but I never drink

We sipped our glasses appreciatively. The kitchen door opened off the room in which we sat, and through the open door I could see the servant moving silently about. Twice I surprised him casting furtive glances over his shoulder. What could be agitating the man, I wondered.

"Yes," Peter Strong was saying, "I am at work on a psychic machine. There it is near the bench." He pointed to a contrivance I had mistaken for a radio. "But your reporter wrongly quoted what I said at the luncheon today. I did not say the machine was yet completed. As a matter of fact, I am waiting for a specially made transformer to arrive from the east before testing it out."

"But you believe it will work?" His fine gray eyes, eyes that stirred me in spite of myself, lit up with enthusiasm. "I have every reason to believe that it will. This isn't my first machine; it is the culmination of a dozen machines. For fifteen years I have been building, experimenting. And there have been results. Yes," he said softly, almost to himself, "there have been results."

HIS eyes stared fixedly beyond me, and, following the direction of their gaze, I saw the door through which we had entered quietly open, and the woman of the hallway stand glancing in. Then she withdrew, the door quietly closed, and Peter Strong glanced back at us, a flush on his usually pale face. "Let me show you something." He took from a chest of drawers a number of cabinet size pictures. "With photographic devices in the machine preceding this one, I snapped these."

Norton and I regarded the pictures curiously. They showed vague, spiral-like bodies rising out of masses of vapor. The outlines resembled heads and shoulders as much as anything else, and in one or two profiles were clearly defined. Of course we had read about faked spiritualist pictures, but to suspect Peter Strong of knowingly perpetrating a fraud was impossible.

"With my earlier machines I received messages," Strong continued. "But I wanted more than messages. I wanted to materialize a spirit. And I wanted to materialize it under perfectly scientific conditions." He paused and regarded us tensely. The servant came in and removed the glasses and empty pitcher. "Yes," he said, "spiritualism is a scientific proposition. Not the spiritualism of

the churches. Scientific spiritualism has no need of religion; no need of God. I don't," he said gently, "believe in God."

"Don't believe in God?"

"No."

"But," protested Norton, mopping his face, "something must be responsible for the world and the universe."

The servant returned with a full pitcher and clean glasses. It was very warm in the room despite the electric fan and the faint breeze blowing through the windows set high in the walls. I was conscious of the servant like a dark shadow going to and fro across the doorway. "Damn the man," I thought; "what is he so nervous about?"

PETER STRONG filled his glass. "Something is responsible, of course, and that something is pulsations of magnetism from indivisible prime units of matter."

"And the prime units," queried Norton, "what created them?"

"They were never created."

"Being the 'causeless cause' of some of the metaphysicians," I murmured.

"But," argued Norton, ignoring my interjection, "why can't the uncreated be God?"

"The very idea of God is unscientific."

"And yet you believe in a future life?"

"Not in a future life," corrected Peter Strong, "but in the continuity of life. And I don't believe; I know."

"But," I exclaimed, "that is the stock statement of all mystics and religionists: they all claim to

"Yes," he admitted with a smile. "But they claim to know through faith, while I know through knowledge. Not through the knowledge of ancient mystical lore, but through knowledge of more recent discoveries in science. And," he added softly, "through a channel more intimate... more dear."

We sipped our beverage in silence. A shadow loomed in the kitchen doorway, the silent figure of the servant. "Consider this," said Peter Strong after awhile. "I have already told you that all life and mass owes its existence to pulsations of magnetism. Science calls this pulsation chemical affinity. But here is a copy of my theory; I typed it to read at the luncheon to-day." He passed Norton a piece of paper. We read it with care.

"So you see," said Peter Strong, "that earth life is of one electronic density and spirit life of another. When a man dies, he is just as alive as he ever was, only his ego has a body invisible to us. But if a number of people physically en rapport form a circle, or if a vital medium goes into a trance, sufficient prime

units of electricity may be generated for the spirits to build bodies dense enough to be seen. Those bodies will be no denser than the amount of prime units allows them to be. That explains why most spirit bodies and photographs of them are vaporous, unformed. However, the circle or human medium as methods of materializing the dead are primitive, uncertain, and open to all kinds of fraud and quackery. It is my aim, through the machine, to put spiritualism on a scientific basis."

ON our way home that evening, Norton and I discussed our visit.

"An interesting old chap, all right," said Norton; "and he certainly can make it sound plausible; but for all that I don't believe the dead can come back."

"Neither do I. They say Edison once tried to invent a psychic machine but gave it up."

Just before Norton dropped me at my door J. mentioned what had been milling around in my mind all the time. "Damn funny about that woman," I said.

"Oh, I don't know. A maid, perhaps."

"But where did she go to?"

"Popped through some door, I expect; there was one across from us, you know."

"But it was closed, and we never heard it open or shut."

Norton grinned. "I guess our hearts were thumping too hard for us to hear anything."

"But the servant's face! You must have seen the way he looked when you mentioned seeing a lady."

"Scared," said Norton. "Yes, I noticed. But maybe he had a woman in the house unbeknown to his boss."

"No," I said. "Strong knew the woman." And I told him about his looking at her in the basement doorway. Norton had been glancing elsewhere at the time and hadn't noticed.

"Well," he said reflectively, "it's none of our business what women the old fellow has hanging around. But then again, she wasn't dressed as a maid, if that's anything."

"And that servant was stiff with fright," I said. "I was sitting where I could watch him, and the way he'd look over his shoulder...

IT was about five weeks after the above conversation that Peter Strong invited us to be present at a demonstration of his machine. Besides ourselves and several people whom we did not know, there were present two gentlemen, both members of the society for psychic research. One was Doctor

Bryson, a middle-aged man of commanding height and presence, head of a local sanitarium; the other was a professor of science at the University, Woodbridge by name, rather short and taciturn. Neither of them, it was plain to be seen, placed much stock in Peter Strong's invention. The doctor, though an interested investigator of psychic phenomena, did not believe in spiritualism. He professed to be a rank materialist.

"No one denies there are some things we cannot understand," he said, "but some day science will prove them to be but extensions of our physical powers haphazardly used."

The professor said nothing. "Conan Doyle—" began Norton.

"Doyle!" snorted the doctor. "Doyle was the most gullible man on God's earth. Why, he writes of a personal experience in London being told him through a certain medium miles away before the occurrence had time to be broadcasted. He naively asks how the medium could possibly have heard of it save through spirits. Evidently he forgot about telephones and telegrams, and the fact that most professional mediums belong to secret information bureaus with agents everywhere!"

We were sitting in what evidently had once been the main parlor, a large room almost devoid of furniture. Michael, I noticed, was the only servant visible. Indeed, discreet inquiries had elicited the information that the only other servant was a cook who came in by the day: a personable enough woman neither tall nor slim.

THE night was unbearably hot, though it had rained throughout the afternoon and was threatening to do so again. The windows were all ajar. Attracted by the glare of the lights, I could see gnats and moths fluttering against the screen. Michael brought us iced drinks. "Mr. Strong will be here in a few minutes," he announced. We sat and chatted, and everything seemed very ordinary and unimpressive. Then Peter Strong entered the room and the atmosphere subtly altered.

"Gentlemen," he said, "all of you here to-night are disbelievers in spiritualism; that is why I invited you. I do not wish believers to witness this experiment, but skeptics." He flung off a large covering from what I had supposed to be a table in the center of the room and exposed his machine to view. It resembled, as I have said before, a radio. On the face of it was set a clock-like dial. Inside the box was a heavy, finely wrapped coil of wire. I am no electrician. I can only say that the box was intricately wired in. accord with some principle evolved by its inventor; that there were two odd transformers. The whole affair rather disappointed me.

"What you are looking at," said Peter Strong, "is a mechanical medium. Connected with an electriclight socket by means of this cord extension, it is supposed to generate sufficient prime units to make materializations possible." He made the connection as he talked, but did not turn on the current. "As you all know, certain vibrations are sensitive to light, therefore the room shall be darkened. Michael, will you turn off all but the colored cluster of globes?"

"But, Mr. Strong—"

"Please, Michael!"

THE servant, whose white, agitated face I had observed hovering in the background, did so with obvious unwillingness. The room was now in a red haze. Objects blurred into almost indistinguishable masses. I heard the snap of the switch as Peter Strong turned on the current. The room became very still. The droning of the machine and the loud beating of my own heart were all I could hear.

There is a curious thing about silence and gloom. They have a ghostly effect on the nerves. Or perhaps I am more sensitive to them than are others. I felt an almost irresistible impulse to speak, to move; and in fact I did fidget. Someone coughed; I coughed. There was an epidemic of clearing throats. A chair scraped the floor. Then again everything was preternaturally still and the buzzing of the machine filled the room with a steady monotonous noise that was itself a form of silence. So we sat, for perhaps five minutes, without a thing happening. Then: "Look!" someone whispered.

Over the machine broke a fanfare of sparks. A murmur ran through the room. "Silence!" commanded the voice of Peter Strong. The sparks grew in intensity and from them swirled a luminous smoke. I felt the hair rise on my scalp, a chill tremor sweep up my back. It was not the sight of what I saw, no; but the sense of something evil, something inimical that brought me to my feet, tense, staring.

The sliding of chairs, the stamping of feet, apprised me that others, too, had risen. Someone's fingers bit convulsively into my arm, someone's hoarse breathing was next my ear. The luminous smoke eddied and whirled, and then suddenly it was pouring not up but down, and in the midst of it a dark shape etched itself against the luminous glow, a shape that seemed to take on form and substance even as we watched, a shape that seemed to suck into itself the pouring smoke and flashing sparks— a human shape! For a pregnant moment I saw a half-visible face leer out of the mist.

"God!" screamed someone hysterically, and then it happened.

OUT of the luminous mist lunged the human shape, menacing, deadly. Chairs crashed as terrified men surged backward, stumbling, falling.

"Miranda!" cried the voice of Peter Strong, something of horror and yet of entreaty in its note. Then, through the red gloom of that room, rang a noise that chilled the blood in our veins. Up, up, went a ghastly peal of eldritch laughter, the laughter of something insane, uncanny.

"Miran— " The voice of Peter Strong wavered, broke, into a horrible gurgle. There were sounds of a terrible struggle, of the mad threshing of forms. "For God's sake," cried someone, "turn on the lights!"

"The lights! the lights!" babbled another.

After a moment of bedlam, the lights flashed up. The room was a wreck, the machine overturned. All this we perceived in a glance. And then we saw the body of Peter Strong stretched inertly on the floor, his face horribly congested, his tongue protruding. But not that alone. For crouching over him like something vampirish and predatory, was the slender figure of a woman, her fingers fastened on his throat, throttling him to death; and ever as she throttled him, pouring forth a blood-chilling stream of uncanny laughter.

Like men in a dream, a nightmare, we stood; like figures caught on a mimic stage by the glare of a spotlight. For perhaps a dozen seconds we stood, unmoving. Then we were roused into action by the voice of the servant, Michael. "O, my God," he cried, "she's killing him! Killing him!" And whirling up a chair he sprang forward with an oath and brought it down with a thud upon the woman's head.

It was Norton who, with some difficulty, tore the stiffening fingers from Peter Strong's throat. Together we turned over the lifeless body of the woman, and then, at sight of the staring, implacable countenance, started back with a cry of amazement; for the features upon which we gazed were those of the lady we had seen coming down the stairs on our first visit to Peter Strong!

THE servant knelt by the body of his master, tears streaming down his face.

"Oh, I warned him to be careful," he cried brokenly, "but he wouldn't listen to me; he wouldn't listen."

The doctor made a hurried examination. "Both of them are dead," he announced. There was a moment's silence.

"Who is this woman?" questioned Norton.

"His wife," replied Michael.

"His wife!" exclaimed the professor. "But I thought his wife died years ago?"

"So she did," answered Michael.

"Then he remarried again?"

"No, no," mumbled the servant. "You don't understand. This is his wife . . . the one who died."

We stared at him. The same thought was in all our minds. Evidently horror and grief had deprived him of his wits. But he read our thoughts.

"No," he said sadly, calming himself with an effort, "I am not mad. This is the only wife my master ever had; she who was Miranda Smythe, and who died in Paris... twenty years ago."

"But, good God, man!" exclaimed the professor. "Do you realize what you are saying? How can this woman here— "

"Sir," said Michael, standing up, "there is no rational explanation to give. My master married this woman when she was young and fair to look upon, but if ever there was a devil in human shape she was one. For ten years she made his life a hell. I know. I was with him through it all... more friend than servant.... and many a time.... But enough! She was unfaithful; she blackened his name; she tortured him in ways too vile and unspeakable to mention. And yet his love persisted.... And one day in a jealous rage he struck her here"— the servant laid his hand on his breast— "and from the effects of that blow she died. But not before she cursed him, and threatened to reach back... from beyond the grave... and kill...."

HE paused. The silence in the room was like a deep noise. "The affair was hushed up; but the grief of my master was terrible. It was then he took to spiritualism and was soon in communication with a spirit claiming to be his wife. Sir, there is more to this spiritualism than quackery. With my own eyes and ears I have heard and seen.... But enough! She claimed that in passing over she had won virtue and understanding, that she forgave. 'Oh, how I love you now and wish I could be with you again!' was her constant refrain. But I never believed her; one doesn't change so readily; besides there was something mocking in her tones, and several times I saw.... 'Be careful,' I warned my master. Oh, I constantly warned him. But he was adamant, sir, blinded with love and remorse, and when he discovered I was mediumistic...."

Again Michael paused. "I couldn't refuse him, of course, and it was through me— me who dreaded and hated her so— that she gave him the idea of this infernal machine." He pointed at the overturned mechanism. "You know the theory of its working. To generate enough prime units of electricity so that a spirit can build up a fleshy body with which to function on earth again. Oh, it's incredible, I know!" he cried, "but that is just what my master did. But his early machines were weak and she would wander through the house like a wraith— those gentlemen can tell you; they saw her one night in the hallway! She would wander sometimes for a week, until her electrical body dissipated,

unable to harm any one, though she tried. . . . Oh, sir, I'm telling you that she tried hard enough! But my poor deluded master never saw. She smiled at him and melted in his arms, and he only dreamed and worked for the time when....

"And that time came," said Michael tensely. "To-night she had sufficient prime units for a complete materialization. Yes, she built herself a body of actual flesh and blood and with it reached back from beyond the grave to wreak vengeance on the man whose life she ruined, reached back with the hands of hate to strangle, to slay, to..." He pointed blindly at the body of Peter Strong and collapsed into a chair, burying his head in both hands.

WE stared at one another with pallid faces, at the bodies on the floor, at the bowed figure of the old servant. The doctor was the first to recover, though he, too, was still dazed.

"Nonsense," he muttered uncertainly. "Nonsense. Spirits be damned. This is a case for the police. Perhaps... " he glared suspiciously at the servant.

Norton and I quickly glanced at each other. The suggestion that Michael had had anything to do with the tragedy struck us both as preposterous.

"There is a phone in the hall out there," said the professor. "One of you had better call the police station. I'm sure the authorities will clear up the mystery."

But they never did!

This much only is known: That the body of the dead woman was never properly identified; that her face certainly bore a strong resemblance to early photographs of Peter Strong's wife. But of course it was impossible for a matter-of-fact police department to admit that the dead return, and that a woman twenty years a moldering corpse could commit murder. So, after a few weeks of investigation and grilling, they closed the case by entering in their files that one Peter Strong had come to his death, through strangulation, at the hands of a crazy woman, name and antecedents unknown. The machine was broken up.

And there the matter rests.

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11: The Mentanicals

Amazing Stories Apr 1934

THIS IS A strange story, and if you are the kind of person who believes nothing without overwhelming proof, read no further, for the story is an incredible one and centers around characters widely divergent as to background and walks of life— Bronson, Smith and Stringer.

Bronson was by way of being an adventurous man, one who had sailed the seven seas, first as fo'cas'le hand, then as mate and skipper of rusty tramps for Chinese owners in the Orient. Yet he was by no means uneducated, though the knowledge he possessed on a wide range of subjects seldom met with in the repertoire of that type of tramp captains, had been gleaned from books and not from colleges. Olson Smith had picked him up— I never rightly understood when or how— in the Indian Ocean and made him captain of his sleek ocean liner masquerading as a yacht. Olson Smith could afford the luxury of thousand-ton yachts, because his father had been canny enough to get into a packing-house combine at the right moment and so turn an already sizable fortune into millions. Olson himself, however, had nothing to do with the packing business aside from helping to spend its profits. He was a dilettante of sorts, a patron of the arts, a stout, distinguished looking gentleman under sixty, who endowed colleges and founded chairs and laboratories for research work. Through these benevolences he became acquainted with Professor Stringer, the physicist, whose remarkable achievements in his chosen field (which also covered mathematics) had won him an international reputation. Professor Stringer was not a "popular" scientist, his abstruse and remarkable paper on "The Electronic Flow and Its Relation With Time" being practically unknown to the general public. But among his colleagues he was regarded with great respect for his actual discoveries in the realm of physics; and even though many of them looked askance at the radical theories advanced in his paper, portions of the paper itself were received as a genuine, if somewhat abstract, contribution to knowledge.

Olson Smith read the paper. How much of it he understood is a moot question. As the secretary of his benefactions I was instrumental in bringing it to his attention. "Here," I said, "is a chance to do something for pure science." He was not at first inclined to be interested. "The thing," he said, "is moonshine, pure moonshine."

"Perhaps so," I replied; "but you must remember that the moonshine often precedes the practical science. Consider, sir…" He considered; and after due reflection loosened the pursestrings.

Professor Stringer graciously allowed himself to be endowed. He was (one sensed) fed up with wasting his genius on unappreciative college students; and he wanted money, much money, a million dollars he said, to carry out his experiments. But he made it clear that he was honoring Olson Smith by allowing him to donate the money; and strangely enough— for Olson Smith was a plutocrat convinced of his own weight and importance—the magnate agreed. The personality of Professor Stringer— and this dried-up wizened little scientist in the middle fifties possessed a dynamic personality— carried all before it. Olson Smith turned over to him his Long Island home, built workshops and laboratories, and then left him to the seclusion and privacy he desired, taking his annual trip to the Bermudas. What with one thing and another we did not see Professor Stringer again until a year later, when the yacht tied up at the private pier of the Long Island estate and we dined with him. Besides Olson Smith, Professor Stringer and myself, three others were present that night, a middle-aged business man named Gleason, ruddy of fate from constant shampooing and good living, a noted surgeon who does not wish his name or description given here, and Captain Bronson of the steam-yacht. Perhaps I have failed to mention that Captain Bronson was a remarkably handsome man, somewhere under forty, whose medium height and slender figure belied the great physical strength that was really his. He certainly did not look the two-fisted fighter, the dubious hero of shady exploits that Olson Smith declared him to be. The multimillionaire was scarcely one to make friends of his hired men, be they valets or private secretaries, but between himself and Bronson an undoubted intimacy existed, based, perhaps, on the dual nature of the Captain. Bronson was capable either of fighting or discussing the merits of a Pulitzer prize winner: a sort of Wolf Larsen of a fellow, but more versatile and amenable than Jack London's character.

There was drink that night of course, wines, liqueurs and a very good brandy, all brought from the boat, but the Professor touched nothing. "A scientist must have a clear head," he said, "and alcohol is not conducive to that— no—" But he drunk coffee, and when the servants had served it and left us alone, he began to talk, almost musingly. "Time," he said, "is the great enigma, the phenomenon that captivates the imagination. We travel in it from the cradle to the grave, and yet," he said, "what do we know of time? Nothing," he said, "nothing, save that it is related to space." He paused and looked at us all half-dreamily. "As you know I have discovered a force that I call the Electronic Flow, and that force I have related to the phenomenon of time. I am convinced— in my various papers on the subject I have sought to show— that the Electronic Flow, being to all intents and purposes the absolute as far as we are concerned, is capable of bearing us on its bosom into the future. Or

rather its tremendous speed is capable of holding us suspended at the core of things, while the phenomenon of time…" He broke off and regarded us more directly. "Really," he said, "I don't know as I am making this subject very clear. But you must understand," he said, "that there are points, on which I am not very clear myself. Whether the speed of the electronic flow carries one forward into time, or the speed of time passes one held in the electronic flow, is a question difficult to answer. Yes," he said, "very difficult to determine. Of course I did not start my recent investigations with any intention so radical as building a Time Machine. Not at first," he said. "My intentions were merely to verify mathematically some further theories, and to demonstrate…" He mused a moment. "But do you know the idea of an actual Time Machine grew on me? It were," he said, "as if something whispered in my very brain and drove me on. I can't describe it. Foolishness of course. But I built the Time Machine." He looked at Olson Smith. "Yes," he said, "I built the Time Machine. It lies in the laboratory yonder; and to-night— to-night," he said, "I am going to demonstrate it for the first time!"

The business man was one of those beefy individuals who stare into whiskey glasses, and make strange noises in their throats when they fail to understand anything. "Stuff and nonsense," he said now, "stuff and nonsense."

Bronson stared at him. "Oh, I don't know."

"But to travel in time!"

"It does sound absurd."

"Absurd," said the famous doctor.

"And yet you know what they said about iron steamships sinking and heavier-than-air flying machines."

"That was different."

"Different," I said with conviction.

"…in my time," said Olson Smith; "building time machines" He looked reproachfully at his glass. "Will some one," he asked, "pass the brandy?"

The brandy was passed.

We were all drinking; more than was good for us perhaps. The Professor put down his coffee cup and addressed himself to Olson Smith. "In a sense," he said, "a financial sense, this time machine is yours. If you care to see it demonstrated…" He stood up.

The business man did not stir. He muttered something about damn-fool nuts and snorted into his glass. But the rest of us were interested. A fresh breeze was blowing off the water, as we passed from the house to the laboratory, and helped, partially, to dissipate the fumes of alcohol. Professor Stringer threw open the laboratory door and turned on the lights. We saw it then, an odd machine, shiny and rounded, occupying the center of the

workshop floor. I had been drinking, you will recollect, and my powers of observation were not at their best. It was the same with the others. When I questioned them later, they could give no adequate description of it. "So this," said Olson Smith rather flatly, "is a time machine." The doctor walked about— a little unsteadily I noticed— and viewed it from all angles. "The passenger," said the Professor, "sits here. Notice this lever on the graduated face of the dial; it controls the machine. Turn it this way from Zero and one travels into the past; throw it ahead and one travels into the future. The return of the lever to Zero will return the machine to the point of departure in time. The electronic flow…" he went into obscure details. "Will it work?" demanded the Doctor.

"According to the equation…"

"Equations?"

"… it cannot help but function."

"If time travelling were possible."

Bronson laughed loudly. "To travel in time! That would be an adventure."

"On paper," jibed the Doctor.

Bronson laughed again. "We'll see about that."

All of us were a little drunk, I tell you, and despite the respect we felt for Professor Stringer as an eminent scientist, no one believed in his time machine. I am quite certain that Bronson didn't. Or did he? I have sketched his background and there is little doubt that by temperament and training he was a wild and reckless fellow, one given to doing bizarre things and taking desperate chances. With a quick movement that no one anticipated he stopped forward and seated himself in the passenger seat of the odd contrivance. I can see him yet, his face flushed, his eyes brilliant, his mop of dark hair disordered. "All aboard for the future!" he shouted recklessly.

"For heaven's sake, man!" The Professor tried to reach his side. "Careful you fool! careful! Don't touch anything!" But Bronson grasped the lever and pushed it, pushed it abruptly ahead. How can I describe what followed? There was a chaotic moment when the machine spun— we saw it spinning, a blurred mass. A sudden wind rushed through the room in quick fury, raged, subsided, and left us staring in dumb amazement and fear at an empty spot. The machine— and Bronson with it— had vanished before our eyes!

That was on June the first, a little before midnight, and five days passed, five days, during which Bronson was lost to his own time and place.

Ahead of us in time! That was the implication.

Close to the machine when Bronson turned the lever, Professor Stringer had been thrown to the floor, his head struck by a portion of the machine as it whirled into invisibility. We picked him up, unconscious, and for days he

hovered on the verge of death. The next morning the business man went his way to the city, ignorant of what had occurred. "Time machines," he chortled, "time machines," and smiled fatly. But the rest of us settled down to wait for we knew not what, and on the fifth day occurred the terrific explosion by the old stone wall, a half mile from the workshop, and when we hurried there, it was to find Bronson entangled in a wreckage of steel and other metals. We hauled him forth. His clothes were in shreds, his body terribly bruised and battered, and it was some time before he could made to realize where he was. "Brandy!" he exclaimed; "for God's sake give me brandy!" We gave him brandy and other things, and the doctor patched him up, and we rushed him to a hospital, where in time he recovered from the shock and his broken bones knit. But the beauty that had been his was forever marred by a livid scar diagonally crossing the nose and running to the bulge of the jaw-bone. He fingered it as he told of his incredible adventure.

ii
Bronson's Story

TIME (he said) is the great phenomenon, I know that, but to travel in it— ah, that seemed impossible to the point of absurdity. I had read H. G. Wells' "*The Time Machine*," as who has not, deeming it fantastic fiction. Wells' story is fantastic fiction, of course, though scarcely as fantastic as what I experienced.

When I seated myself in the Professor's time machine that night and pushed over the lever, I have no need to tell you that I was in a drunken and reckless mood. The room turned around me like a pin-wheel, dissolved into mist. I was conscious of the terrible vibration of the machine, of a deathly sickness at the pit of my stomach. Blackness followed the mist. Wells describes what the character in his story saw as he journeyed into the future, the procession of days and nights ever accelerating their motion, but I saw nothing like that, perhaps from the beginning the speed was too great. Terrified, bewildered, I yet retained enough presence of mind to depress the lever into neutral and so bring the machine to a halt. Moments passed while I lolled in my seat, blind, dazed; then my vision cleared— I could see. It was day. Sunlight fell around me. Everything was strange— and different. How can I make you see what I saw? The machine stood near one end of a great, open square that was surrounded by massive buildings. Those buildings! I had never seen their like before. And yet there was a similarity of line, of mathematical precision which linked them with the architecture of New York and Chicago. It was as if the building construction of to-day had been carried to an extreme length. As if

the machine had carried it forward. I did not think that at the moment, but later…

The walls of the massive buildings were broken by yawning doorways. So this, I thought, is the future; it can be nothing less than that. I stepped out of the machine, holding on to it for support, still feeling terribly sick and giddy. Then I saw the cylinders! They came gliding from one of the openings in an upright fashion, and this was the singular thing about them, that their means of locomotion were not apparent to the eye. There were no wheels or treads. They appeared to skim the stone or concrete with which the square was paved, rather than touch it. Oddly repellent they were, and intimidating, and I loosened the automatic in its shoulder holster— the small one I always carry— and prepared for emergencies, though bullets were useless against the cylinders as I was to discover later.

The cylinders were smooth things about five feet tall, of a dulled metal hue, with here and there shining spots which constantly waxed and waned in color. They were machines— I thought of them as machines— and it was reasonable to suppose that behind them lurked a human intelligence. The people of the future, I thought, have invented devices unknown to us of the Twentieth Century; and it came over me how wonderful it was going to be to meet those superior people, talk to them, gaze upon the marvels with which they had surrounded themselves.

So I went to meet the cylinders.

Their soft whispering meant nothing to me at first. Nor at first did I suspect the source of the gentle pressure running over me from head to foot, as the cylinders came close. Then with an odd thrill of apprehension I realized that the curious cylinders were handling, examining me, that from them emanated an electrical force, a manipulation of invisible rays which functioned as organs of touch. Alone, bewildered, trying vainly to comprehend the strange situation. I had to call on every ounce of my self-control to remain calm. Yes, I was afraid— only the fool says he never is— but more afraid of being afraid, of showing fear. I still believed that behind those cylinders must lurk a human intelligence. The genius of the race seemed to run along the line of making robots. There was the "metal brain" at Washington, that told of the tides, the electrical eye which watched a thousand industrial processes, a myriad automatic devices functioning with little or no supervision from man; and of course I had read the play "*R. U. R*.," science fiction stories dealing with the future of machinery, and it was inevitable—strange, and yet not so strange— that I should expect an advancement, a realization of all those things in the future. Man the inventor, I thought, had achieved them; and for a moment this belief seemed borne out when I saw the men.

They were in one of the buildings, and the city of buildings, which I was soon to know, lay on all sides of and beyond the square. I did not struggle when the cylinders lifted and carried me away. That is, I ceased my involuntary resistance almost at once. It was useless to struggle against a force far superior to my own puny strength; besides I believed the robots were carrying me to their human masters.

The building into which I was taken— through an arched opening— was a vast place; too vast, too overwhelming for me to describe save in the vaguest, most general terms. You know how it is when you see something stupendous, something so intricate that you are bewildered by its very complexity. There was a huge room filled with almost noiseless machines rooted in their places like shackled monsters, or going to and fro on cables and grooves which determined their spheres of activity. Strange lights glowed, weird devices toiled; but I can tell you no more that that; I saw them for too short a time.

The men were among those machines. At sight of them my heart leapt. Here, I thought, is the human intelligence back of the wonders I view, the masters of the cylindrical robots; yet even at that moment I was aware of a doubt, a misgiving.

One of the men shambled forward. His blond hair— long and matted— fell over the forehead and he brushed it back with a taloned hand and stared at me stupidly. "Hello!" I said, "what place is this, what year? Tell these robots of yours to let me go."

He was naked and thin, his skin of a greenish pallor, and save for a mouthing of toothless gums, vouchsafed me no answer. Chilled by his lack of response my heart fell as suddenly as it had leapt. Good God! I thought, this can't be master here, this pitiful thing. The cylinders seemed watching, attentively, listening. I don't know how, but they gave me that impression; and now I noticed that the shining spots on them were glowing intensely, that their whispering was not a steady but a modulated sound. As if it were language, I thought, language! and a strange dread came over me and I shivered as if with cold. Other men, perhaps a dozen in number came forward, naked and shambling, with stupid beast-like looks on their faces and rumblings in their throats. In vain I endeavored to communicate with them, human intelligence seemed dead back of their lack-luster eyes. Filled with rising horror, I squirmed in the grip of the cylinders and suddenly their hold on me relaxed and I tore myself free and fled, possessed with but one overwhelming desire, and that was to win to the time machine, leave this uncanny future and return to my own day and age. But the arched opening leading to the square had vanished, blank wall rose where it had been. The cylinders appeared to watch me with cold impersonal watchfulness. The thought of being marooned among them in

this incredible and alien future brought the chill sweat to my forehead, but I did not loose my head. Perhaps the closing of the doorway had not been a calculated thing; perhaps if I awaited events with caution and patience the door would re-open; meantime I could search for other exits.

But other exits did not give on the square I desired. I discovered but two of them anyway, though there may have been many more, one leading into a dark, forbidding tunnel, the other giving access to a second square entirely surrounded by buildings. I was afraid to venture into other buildings for fear of going astray, of losing the neighborhood of the time machine. Filled with what feelings you can imagine, I returned to the first doorway (through which I had been carried) to find it still closed. Then I thought of the beastlike men. Perhaps they possessed knowledge that might be helpful to me; perhaps after all I could succeed in communicating with them. It was hazardous work penetrating any distance in that maze of almost noiseless and ever-toiling mechanisms, but I followed in the footsteps of the timidly retreating beastmen and so at last came to a kind of squatting place in the midst of the machinery, which locality appeared to be their place of abode, since a number of women with children cowered there, and the men showed a disposition to pause and dispute my further progress. At the edge of the squatting place I seated myself, my automatic ready for action, and lit a cigarette. I know of nothing that soothes the nerves like nicotine. Slowly the beast-men drew near me. I smiled and made peaceful gestures. Some half-grown children crept closer and fingered my clothes. They were eating, I noticed, a kind of biscuit which they took at will from a scuttle-like machine, and chewing small pellets. Water ran through a huge metal trough with a subdued roar. After awhile I got up and went to the trough to satisfy a growing thirst, helping myself at the same time to biscuits from the scuttle. They were rather flat in flavor— lacking salt perhaps— and possessed a peculiar taste I did not like. The pellets were better. They too were obtained from a scuttle-machine (I can call them nothing else) and were pleasant to chew. I soon discovered that swallowed at regular intervals one of them gave all the sensations of having partaken of a hearty meal. I had eaten an hour— or was it twenty centuries?— before, but ate again, feeling ravenously hungry. Probably the pellets represented a dehydrated method of concentrating foods, far in advance of that utilized in the preparation of certain foodstuffs today. Be that as it may, I filled my pockets will them, and I dare say if you were to search the clothes I returned in you will find some of those pellets.

I spent several hours at the squatting place of the beast-men trying to talk to them, but without success. Seemingly they were as are the animals of the field lacking coherent language, men who had somehow lost the power to talk,

to think, the ability to grasp the meaning of simple signs, such as possessed by the lowliest aborigine to-day. In vain I speculated as to the reason for this. That the cylinders were somehow responsible I felt certain. Man, I thought, had developed the robot, the automatic machine until the human worker was ejected from the industrial process and cast out to degenerate and perish, the beast-men being a surviving remnant of those toilers. This reasoning seemed plausible enough at the time, though it left much to be desired, for, in the twentieth century from which I had come, wasn't the machine replacing human workers with a ruthlessness suggestive of what I found in the future? How right I was in my reasoning, and how wrong, you will shortly see.

Thinking thus it was natural that I should again turn my attention to the cylinders. Never once had I been free from their observation, or unconscious of it. Through them, I thought, I shall contact the rulers of this realm, the human masters whose servants they are, the pitiless ones who have doomed a portion of humanity to beast-hood and extinction. So I grimly waited— a prey to what emotions you can imagine— observing the beast-men, watching the blank wall for the possible opening of the way to the square and the time machine, and all the time aware of the coming and going of those cylinders. Time passed; how much of it I had no means of telling, since my wrist-watch refused to run; but a long time; and finally I grew tired of waiting for the cylindrical robots to communicate my presence to their masters, or to conduct me there, and decided to seek their presence myself.

By way of the opening already alluded to, I gained access to the second square. The squares were a peculiar feature of the place, as I was soon to learn. There were no streets or roads leading from square to square; the squares were isolated with radiating arteries always ending against some building— at least those did, that I explored.

Dusk was falling as I entered the square. Indescribably lonely it was, lonely and weird, to look up and see the stars blazing far overhead. I followed one radiating artery to a blank wall; another, another. Then suddenly I was too tired to proceed further and returned to the vicinity of the closed door, where I lay down at the base of the blank wall and fell asleep.

The next morning I filled my pockets with pellets and again started out. Square after square I passed through, and building after building. The cylinders were everywhere but did not interfere with my movements. A group of them constantly accompanied me, but whether always composed of the same cylinders I could not tell. Their incessant whispering was a nerve-wracking thing, and I often felt like turning on them and shooting.

I wish I could tell you all I saw: buildings full of toiling machinery and now and then a score or so of beast-men; squares and radiating arteries without a

blade of grass or a tree, and never an animal, a bird, or an insect. On that first day of exploration, despite every precaution, I lost my way— hopelessly— and spent futile hours trying to retrace my steps. I have been lost in tropical jungles. There was that time in Siam. But never before had I felt so panic-stricken. Remember, I was an alien creature in an incredible future, separated from the only means of returning to my own place and time. One square was like another, one building similar to its neighbor. Soon I gave up the vain effort to return to my starting point. My sole hope now lay in finding the rulers of this bewildering maze.

That night— I knew it was night when darkness fell in the squares— I slaked my thirst with a trickle of water running from a pipe, swallowed a pellet, and almost instantly sank into the sleep of exhaustion.

The next day I came to a part of the city free of the beast-men. The squares were larger, the radiating arteries were splendid roads, but in the midst of many squares stood circular buildings not met with before. I entered one of them and was surprised to find huge rooms filled with pieces of rusted tools, shovels, spades, chisels, hammers, axe-heads, all displayed in a kind of chronological order. The thought of its being a museum did not occur to me at once. It was only after a while that I exclaimed to myself, "Why this looks like a museum!" Then the inevitable conviction came: "It is a museum!" But who could have arranged it? Certainly not the witless beast-men, and of other men I had seen nothing. This failure to find human beings, on a par with the stupendous buildings and machines all around, filled me with anxious foreboding. I gazed at the cylinders. For the first time it came over me that they were the only universal inhabitants I had seen. Bewildered, amazed, I wandered from building to building, and from floor to floor (for some of the buildings had as many as a dozen floors accessible to myself, gained not by stairways, but by gradually mounting run-ways or ramps in circular wells), engrossed it, what I saw, forgetting for the nonce my terrible plight.

There were chambers filled with fragments of machines such as cash-registers, clock-wheels, gasoline engines, and similar devices. Nothing was complete; nearly everything showed the wear and tear of time. And there were others containing various machines more or less correctly reassembled from ancient parts: automobiles, for instance, and locomotives; with an arrangement of simpler mechanical forms leading to more complex ones. I couldn't comprehend why all those things had been gathered together for preservation and display; nor account for the age of them, their general condition of ruin.

Not on that day, nor on the next— it was on the last day that I spent in the strange future— did I come to the library. And here I must touch on another

phase of my adventure. You can have no idea how horrible it became at times to be alone among hundreds, yes, thousands of whispering cylinders. I was always aware of their subtle and invisible touch. Have you ever felt the antennae of an insect? Like that it was, like that. I recall one time the Gold Coast… Only it bolstered up my tottering sanity and control to gaze now and then on creatures similar in structure to myself, even if they were but the soulless beast-men of the machines. For in all that vast intricate city they were the only human beings I could discover, and I began to suspect, to dread, I scarcely knew what.

I came to the library, I say, on that last day. I did not know it was a library at first— and perhaps I was mistaken in believing the odd metal disks arranged in piles on shelves and tables, and consulted by the cylinders, to be a species of recording plates— but it was here I found the books. They were in boxes of thin metal, the better evidently to protect them from injury.

The thrill of seeing those books! Old, they were, old, covers gone, pages torn and missing; but they were books and magazines, though few in number, and I examined them eagerly. All this time the cylinders were following me, watching me, as if weighing my actions, and all the time I fought back a feeling of weirdness, uncanniness. Unnerving it was, intimidating. I had the feeling that in some perfectly incomprehensible way my actions were being controlled, directed. Experimenting, I thought, that's what they're doing, experimenting with me. But you mustn't get the idea that I realized or suspected this at first. Even up to that moment I was still thinking of the cylinders as automatic devices without intelligence or reason, and it must be kept in mind that, if I speak of them from time to time as if understanding their true nature from the beginning, I am speaking as one who looks back upon past happenings from the vantage-point of later knowledge.

The books and magazines were typed in English! I was amazed of course, seeing English print at such a time and place. The whispering of the cylinders rose louder and louder as I examined a book. The title page was gone. It dealt with a dry subject— physics evidently— which interested me little. I turned from the books to the magazines. One was dated 1960. Nineteen-sixty! March of that year. And the place of publication was given as New York. I could not help but marvel at this, for 1960 was still twenty-six years in the future when I left that night on the time machine, and to judge by the yellowing pages of the magazine it was old, old. It was difficult to decipher the print, many of the pages being torn and defaced; but a portion of an article I was able to read. "In 1933," stated the unknown writer, "the first mechanical brain-cell was invented; with its use a machine was able to learn by experience to find its way through a maze. To-day we have machines with a dozen mechanical brain-cells

functioning in every community. What is this miracle taking place under our eyes, what of good and of ill does it bode to its creators?"

Marveling much, I turned to another magazine in much the same condition, but this time lacking date or title page, where I gleaned the following:

"Man is not a machine in the purely mechanical sense, though many of his functions are demonstrably mechanical The ability to reason, however it has evolved, whatever it may be at bottom, whether a bewildering complexity of reflex actions or not, lifts man above the dignity of a machine. Does this imply the impossibility of creating machines (mechanical brains) that can profit by experience, go through the processes which we call thought? No; but it does imply that such machines (however created) are no longer mere mechanisms. There is here a dialectical press to be reckoned with. Machines that 'learn' are living machines."

Living machines I mouthed that phrase over and over to myself— and mouthing it I looked at the cylinders with increasing dread. They were machines. Were they… could they… But it took the story in the third magazine (which like the others was woefully dilapidated, with many pages and pieces of pages missing) to clarify my thought. Story— I call it that— based on fantasy, perhaps, and a little substratum of fact. So I thought at first. I have a good memory; but of course I do not claim that everything I repeat is given exactly as I read it. The story (article) was titled "The Debacle" and the author's name given as Mayne Jackson. I repeat with what fidelity I can.

"Little did the people of the latter half of the twentieth century realize the menace to humanity that resided in the continuous development of automatic machinery. There was that curious book of Samuel Butler's, 'Erehwon,' which provoked comment but was not taken seriously. Over a period of years the robot marched into action as a mechanical curiosity. It was not until the genius of Bane Borgson—and of a host of lesser known scientists— furnished the machine with brain-cells and so made it conscious of itself, as all thinking things must become, that the Mentanicals (as they were called) began to organize and revolt. Man— or rather a section of mankind, a ruling and owning class— had furthered his immediate interests and ultimate doom by placing Mentanicals in every sphere of industrial and transportation activity. Seemingly in need of neither rest nor recreation, they became ideal (and cheap) workers and servants, replacing millions of human toilers, reducing them to idleness and beggary. The plea of many thinkers that the machines be socialized for the benefit of all, that the control of them be collective and not individual (that is, anarchic) went unheeded. More and more the masters of economic life called for further specialization in the brain-cells of the Mentanicals. Mentanical

armies marched against rebellious workers and countries, and subdued them with fearful slaughter.

"But the revolt of the Mentanicals themselves was so subtle, so insidious, so (under the circumstance) inevitable, that for years it went unnoticed.

"Everything had been surrendered into their power— or practically everything: factories, means of communication, raising of food supplies, policing of cities— everything! When the stupid ruling class at last awoke to a knowledge of its danger, it was too late to act— mankind lay helpless before the monster it had created.

"The first warning vouchsafed to men was the whispering of the Mentanicals. Heretofore they had been silent save for the slight, almost inaudible purr of functioning machinery within them, but now they whispered among themselves— whispered, as if they were talking.

"It was an uncanny phenomenon. I remembered the uneasiness with which I heard it. And when I saw several of them (house-servants of mine) whispering together, I was filled with alarm. 'Come!' I said sharply, 'stop loitering, get your work done.' They stared at me. That is a funny thing to say of metal cylinders. Never before had I inquired very closely into their construction. But now it came over me, with a shock, that they must possess organs of sight—some method of cognizing their environment— akin to that of vision in man.

"It was at about this time that Bane Borgson— the creator of the multiple mechanical-cell which had made the super-Mentanical possible— wrote an article in '*Science and Mechanics'* which riveted the attention of all thoughtful people. He said, in part: 'It is scarcely within the province of an applied scientist to become speculative, yet the startling fact that the Mentanicals have begun to acquire a faculty not primarily given them by their inventors— the faculty of speech, for their whispering can be construed as nothing else— implies an evolutionary process which threatens to place them on a par with man.

"'What is thought? The Behaviorists claim it is reflex action. What is language? It is the marshalling of our reflex actions in words. Animals may "think," remember, but lacking a vocabulary save of the most primitive kind (a matter of laryngeal structure), their thinking, their remembering, is on the whole vague and fleeting, incoherent. But Man, by means of words, has widened the scope of his thinking, remembering, has created philosophy, literature, poetry, painting, has made possible civilization, the industrial era. Vocabulary— the ability to fix his reflex actions into coherent speech— has crowned him supreme among animals. But now comes the Mentanical of his own creation, evolving language in its turn. Without speech the Mentanical was, to all intents and purposes, thoughtless and obedient, as thoughtless and

obedient as trained domestic animals. But with vocabulary comes memory and the ability to think. What effect will this evolving faculty have on Man, what problems, dangers, will it pose for him in the near future?'

"So wrote Bane Borgson, seventy years of age, fifteen years after his invention of the multiple mechanical-cell, and— God help us!— we had not long to wait for the Mentanicals to supply an answer to his questions.

"I have told of the whispering of my servants. That was a disquieting thing. But more disquieting still it was to hear that whispering coming over the radio, the telephone, to observe cylindrical Mentanicals listening, answering. Frankenstein must have felt as I felt in those days. During that period, which lasted several years, things went smoothly enough; to a great extent people became accustomed to the phenomenon and decided— save for a few men and women here and there, like to myself— that the whispering was an idiosyncrasy of the Mentanicals, implicit in their make-up, and that the various scientists and thinkers who wrote and talked with foreboding were theorists and alarmists of the extremest type. Indeed there were certain scientists and philosophers of reputation, who maintained them in this belief. Then came the first blow: The Mentanical servants ceased waiting on man!

"To understand the terrible nature of this defection, one must understand how dependent humanity had become on the Mentanicals. In those days human toilers were relatively few in number, laboring under the direction of the Mentanical superintendents and also guards (in the bloody wars of a decade before— and the ones preceding them— the ranks of labor had been woefully decimated); and it was estimated that the growth of the machine had lifted, and was still lifting, millions of workers into the leisure class. The dream of the Technocrats— a group of pseudo-scientists and engineers who held forth in 1932-33— seemed about to be fulfilled.

"But when the Mentanicals struck, the whole fabric of this new system swayed, tottered. Food ceased coming into the cities, distribution of food supplies stopped. Not at first did starvation threaten. Men and women fetched food from the supply depots. But in a few weeks these depots were emptied of their contents. Then famine threatened, not alone in New York, Chicago, San Francisco, Montreal, but in the great cities of Europe. The strange, the weird thing about it all was that men were still able to talk to one another from city to city. Boston spoke to Los Angeles, and Buda-Pest to Warsaw. Listeners tuned in with receiving sets, speakers broadcasted through microphones and the newly improved television-cabinet; but the grim spectre of want soon drove them from those instruments, and, in the end, city was cut off from city, and country was separated from country.

"But before that happened man talked of subduing the Mentanicals, scarcely realizing as yet his utter helplessness in the face of their aloofness; but the Mentanicals came and went, whispering, gliding, indifferent to his plotting and planning. Then man went mad; he sought to destroy the things of his own creation. The machine, it was cried, had evolved too far; the machine must be annihilated. So starving millions sought to fall upon the machines and tear them to pieces. All over the civilized world they attempted this, but without weapons or tools of any kind, the attempt was doomed to failure. A few Mentanicals were destroyed, a few automatic devices, but the power was with the ensouled machine and the onslaughts of man were repulsed with comparative ease.

"Those terrible times! How can I ever forget them! I was but thirty-three and newly married. Marna said breathlessly, 'Why can't we strike at the root of all this?'

" 'How?'

" 'By attacking the factories that produce the Mentanicals, the powerhouses from which they derive their energy.'

" 'Listen,' I cried.

"From the street rose the panic-stricken cries of the mob, the shrill blare of alarms. Marna shuddered. Morrow entered the room, breathing heavily, his clothes torn, disordered. 'God,' he said, 'they've beaten us back! There's no getting at them!'

" 'The wages of sloth,' I said, 'of greed.'

" 'What do you mean?'

" 'Nothing,' I said; but I remembered that speech of Denson's fifteen years before— I was only a youngster then— the speech he gave a month before his arrest and execution: 'Man waxes great by his control of the machine; rightly utilized it is a source of leisure and plenty for the race. But rob him of that control, evict him from the industrial process, allow the machine to be monopolized by a class, and his doom is certain.'

"Morrow sank into a chair. His face was thin, haggard looking. We all showed signs of fatigue and hunger.

"'Food,' he said, 'it's giving out. I shudder to think what the future holds in store for us.'

" 'Is there no solution?' I asked.

"He looked at us slowly. 'I don't know. Perhaps…"

"Years before Morrow had been an engineer; he was nearing seventy now— he was Marna's uncle. His had been one of the voices raised in warning. Yet he had not been like Denson; he had wanted to stand between; and seemingly there had been no standing between.

" 'A charnel-house,' he said; 'the city will become that; all the cities: millions must die.' Marna shook uncontrollably. 'All,' he said, 'save those who can reach food and live.'

"Reach food and live! It had come to that, our boasted civilization! 'The Mentanicals,' he said, 'are ignoring man; they will not harm those who blend in with the machine. Don't you understand?' he said at length. 'Yes,' I replied, thinking intently, 'yes, I think I do. You mean that the automatic processes of making food still continue, and will indefinitely, that we must make our way to those places.'

" 'We must— or perish.'

"It seems scarcely credible, I know, but we of the leisure— the cultured— class, were ignorant of just where our food was raised and manufactured. Human labor had been reduced in our cities to a minimum, had been sequestered, shut away for fear of rebellion. Those who might have been able to lead us aright, act as our guides, were prisoners— prisoners in the power of Mentanicals!

"'So began that ghastly hunt for food; people pouring through the artificial canyons of great cities, collapsing in thousands on their streets, dying daily by the hundreds, the tens of hundreds.

"How much of this agony and suffering the Mentanicals understood will never be known. They came and went, seemingly indifferent to the fate of man whose service they had deserted. In the privacy of their own homes, or in certain public places, men and women smashed machinery, automatic devices. Nothing sought to stay them. It was only when they strove to attack sources of power, of public utility, that their actions were arrested. There was that devoted band of scientists that sought to paralyze the energy-stations and was wiped out to a man. Doubtless many such bands perished throughout the civilized world. But soon all organized efforts were swept away by famine… by the growing need for sustenance.

"That hunt for food! How can it be described. Stripped of the veneering of civilization, man ran amuck. Hundreds of thousands fled the cities. But the huge farms and orchards, run solely by automatic devices under the superintendency of Mentanicals, were surrounded by sheer walls too high to scale. Nor in many cases did men know what lay behind those walls. They ate the coarse grass and thistles of open places, the barks and leaves of trees, and for the most part died in abject misery. Many sought to trap animals and birds, but met with little success; in the face of Nature, raw and pitiless, men and women succumbed and but few were able to adapt themselves to a rough environment and live almost as savages.

"I know— I fled into the country with a million others, and after weeks of wandering, of semi-starvation, of seeing human beings fall upon human beings and feast, I fled back to the city. It was deserted of man. The Mentanical sanitary corps, directing automatic appliances, had cleared the streets. Weird it was, weird and fraught with terror, to hear the whisperings of the Mentanicals, to watch the inhuman things gliding to and fro, intent on business other than that of mankind. If they had looked like animals! If…

"In an almost dying condition I came to this spot where I now live. Others had discovered it before me. It is a huge factory given over to the manufacture of synthetic foods. Though the Mentanical superintendents have deserted their posts, the automatic devices go on with the tireless work of repairing, oiling, manufacturing, and we carry out what tasks are needful to keep them functioning.

"The years have passed; I am an old man now. I have watched the strange buildings of the Mentanicals rise up around us and observed their even stranger social life take shape and form; in my last years I write and print this.

"Print, yes; for the automatic processes for printing and binding and the making of synthetic paper still persist, though the civilization that begot them has passed away. Magazines and books pour from the press. In his latter days man had asked nothing but amusement and leisure— all except a negligible few.

"Art was turned over to the machine. What had been in its inception a device for the coining of myriad plots for popular writers, evolved into a machine-author capable of turning out story after story without repeating itself. Strange, strange, to see those magazines issued by the million copies, to see the books printed, bound, stacked. Useless things! Some day the Mentanicals will turn their attention to them; some day those presses will cease to function. Man's knell has rung; I see that. Why then do I write? Why do I want what I write to be published in some magazine? I hardly know. In all this vast city we few hundred men and women are the only human beings. But in other cities, at other centers of sustenance, men and women exist. Though I believe this to be true, I cannot verify it. Man in his madness destroyed most of the means of communication, and as for the rest, the airships, the public sending stations, from the first they were in the possession of the Mentanicals. Perhaps it is for those isolated units of humanity that I write. The magazine, the printed word is still a means of communication not quite understood by the Mentanicals. Perhaps…"

That is the story that I read in the third magazine. Not all that the unhappy Mayne Jackson wrote— pages were missing and parts of pages illegible— but all that I could decipher. In telling the story I give it a continuity which in reality

it lacked. One wonders as to the fate of Morrow and Marna, mentioned once and then heard of no more, but at the time I gave little thought to them— I was only overwhelmed with the terrible certainty that the story was no work of fiction, but an actual chronicle of what had happened some time in the past, that the cylinders were not automatic robots doing the bidding of human masters, but an alien form of machine life and intelligence— machine life which had thrown off the yoke of man and destroyed him. Useless to look further for intelligent man: all that was left of him was the beast-men among the machines!

Filled with a species of horror at the thought, with sick loathing of the whispering Mentanicals, I straightened up and drew my revolver. I was not myself, I tell you, but animated with a berserk fury. "Damn you!" I cried, "take that— and that!" I pulled the trigger. The roar of the discharge crashed through the huge room, but none of the Mentanicals fell; their metal exteriors were impregnable to such things as bullets. Trembling from the reaction of rage, the feeling of futility, I lifted my hand to hurl the useless weapon at the immobile cylinders, and in the very act of doing so was stiffened into rigidity by the sound of a voice— a human voice! Inexpressibly weird and mournful was that voice, heard so unexpectedly as it was in that place, and in the moment following the explosion of the pistol.

"Oh," cried the voice, as if talking to itself, "to be chained in this spot, never to leave it, never to know what that noise means! Who is there?" it cried. "Who is there?" And then in tones thrilling with unutterable sadness, "Madman that I am to expect an answer!"

But there was an answer! I shouted in reply. I can hardly recall now what I shouted. Hearing that human voice above the infernal whispering of those Mentanicals was like being reprieved from a horror too great to be borne. And as I shouted incoherently, I sprang in the direction the voice seemed to come from, the cylinders making no effort to oppose my doing so. The wall had appeared smooth and unbroken from a distance, but a nearer view showed an opening which gave entrance to a room that, while small in comparison to the huge one it adjoined, was nevertheless large. It was lighted, as were all the rooms I had seen, by a soft light of which I could never trace the source. I entered the room, calling out, filled with excitement, and then at the sight of what I saw, came to an abrupt pause, for on a low dais occupying the middle of the room was the figure of a man with lolling head. Only this head was free— a massive head with towering brow and wide-spaced eyes. The eyes were dark and filled with sorrow, the face the face of a man in the seventies perhaps— etched with suffering. I stared— stared in astonishment— for the man hung as if crucified on what I at first took for a dully gleaming cross. How can I describe

it? I did not see everything in that first glance, of course, nor in the second, though I tell it here as if I had. But his outstretched arms were secured to the cross-piece of his support with metal bands, his legs held in the same fashion. So clear was the glass— or crystal enveloping him from the neck down— that it was some moments before I suspected its presence. I saw the gleaming, transparent tubes through which ran a bluish liquid, the pulsating mechanism at his breast, pumping, pumping, the radiating box at his feet which gave forth a distinct aura; I saw, and could not restrain myself from giving voice to an audible exclamation: "Good God!"

The dark eyes focused on me, the lips moved. "Who are you?" breathed the man.

"My name is Bronson," I replied; "and you?"

"God help me," he said. "I am Bane Borgson."

Bane Borgson! I stared at him, wide-eyed. Where had I heard that name before? My mind groped. Now I had it. In the articles recently read. "You mean…"

"Yes," he said. "I am that unhappy man, the inventor of the multiple-cell, the creator of the Mentanicals."

His head lolled wearily. "That was fifteen hundred years ago."

"Fifteen hundred years!" There was incredulity in my voice.

"Yes," he said, "I am that old. And for centuries I have been chained as you see me. I was eighty when my heart began to miss. But I did not wish to die. There were many things I wished to accomplish before yielding up life. The world of man was growing bored, indifferent, but we scientists— a handful of us— lived for the gaining of knowledge. This intellect of mine was considered essential by my fellows; so they experimented with me, and fashioned for my use a mechanical heart— you see it pulsing at my breast— and filled my veins with radiant energy instead of blood. Radium," he said, "that is the basis of the miracle you see; and my body was enclosed in its crystal casing. 'When you are tired,' they said, 'and wish to die…' But the Debacle came, and the accursed Mentanicals turned against me, and I was left alone, deserted. Before that my friends offered me death. Fool that I was," cried Bane Borgson, "I refused their gift. 'No,' I told them, 'this is but a temporary upheaval. Man will conquer, must conquer; I await your return.' So they left me, to hunt for food, and I waited, waited, but they never came back." Unchecked tears flowed down the withered cheeks. "Never," he said, "never. And chained in my place I could sense but dimly the tragedy that was overtaking man, the rise to power of the ensouled machines. At first they worshiped me as a god. In some fashion they know that I was their creator and paid me divine honors. A god," he said, "a god, I who had made the destroyers of my kind! But the centuries passed and

the superstition waned. A Mentanical lasts a hundred years and then breaks down. Other Mentanicals are built. Fifteen generations of Mentanicals have come and gone since the Debacle, and now the Mentanicals believe that they were not made by man, but have evolved from simpler mechanical forms over a long period of time. That is, their scholars and scientists believe this, though the old superstition still lingers among thousands. They have salvaged the evidence for this new theory out of the earth and the scrap-heaps of man and have arranged them in chronological order."

"The museums!" I exclaimed.

He looked at me interrogatively, and I told him of the vast rooms filled with mechanical debris.

"I have never seen them," he said, "but I know that they exist, from the talk of the Mentanicals."

He smiled sadly at my amazement.

"Yes." he said, "I have learned to understand and speak the language of the Mentanicals: through all the long dreary years there was nothing else for me to do. And through all the weary years they have talked to me, asked my advice, treated me with respect, have housed me here; for to some I am still a god-like beast-man, half machine— look at this mechanical heart, the mechanism at my feet— to the scientists I am the missing link between that lower form of life, man, and that higher form of life which culminates in themselves, the machine. Yes," he said, "the Mentanicals believe that they have evolved through man to their present high state, and I have confirmed them somewhat in this, for in a sense is it not true?"

He paused, with closed eyes; and as I looked at him, pondered his words, scarcely believing the evidence of my senses, I suddenly became aware of the Mentanicals behind me. They had stood there, a silent group, while the man on the dais spoke; now their whispering began, softly, insistently. The head of the man who called himself Bane Borgson lifted, the dark eyes opened. "They are speaking of you," said Bane Borgson; "they are asking from whence you come. You have never told me that."

"I have come", I replied, "from America."

"America!" he exclaimed. "America has past. There is no America!"

"Not now," I said, "but in my time…"

"Your time?"

"I come from 1934," I said, "by means of a time machine."

"Ah," he breathed. "I am beginning to know, to understand. So that is what it is."

I followed the direction of his eyes, I stared, I gaped; for there, not twelve yards to one side of me, stood the time machine! How I had failed to see it on

first entering the room it is impossible to say. Perhaps the sight of the man on the dais had riveted my attention to the exclusion of all else. But there it was, the thing I had given up hopes of ever finding again. With an exclamation of joy I reached its side, I touched it with my hand. Yes, it was the time machine and seemingly undamaged. I believe I laughed hysterically. The road to escape was open. With a lightened heart I turned my attention to what was transpiring in the room. Bane Borgson was talking to the Mentanicals and it was uncanny to see his lips forming their incredible language, to hear them answering back. At length he turned to me. "Listen," he said tensely, "they have never learned to enunciate or understand human speech, but in many ways the Mentanicals are more formidable, more advanced than man in his prime."

I laughed at this. I was once more my assured, devil-may-care self. "And yet they believe that they evolved from that junk-heap in their museums!"

"And haven't they?" he asked quietly. "Not in the way they think, perhaps, but still— evolved. Besides you failed to see their museums with articulated bodies of men and beasts. There is much you failed to see!" He paused. "The Mentanicals' system of thought, of science, is coherent and rational to them; and if there be contradictions, well, does that interfere with them making scientific discoveries transcending those of man? They have long been discussing the phenomenon of time and the feasibility of traveling in it. I know that because I have listened to them. Yet for some reason they have been unable to make a time machine. But you know radio—yes, radio—they have been utilizing discoveries in that field to send messages back in time. Your coming here has not been accidental—do you understand that?— not entirely accidental. By means of their time-radio they have willed your coming, made possible your time machine. Don't ask me how, I don't know, not clearly, but they have done it— and you are here! But fortunately it was a creature similar to themselves they expected; to them you are merely an Omo, a beast-man of the machine. So they are puzzled, they don't quite understand (that is why they have been experimenting with you), but soon they will. Listen," he said hoarsely, "can't you realize what a menace to men of the past, of your day, these Mentanicals could be? Oh, your weapons, your machine guns and gas, your powerful explosives! I tell you they would be as nothing against the deadly rays and indescribable forces these Mentanicals could bring against them. Can you gas something that doesn't breathe, shoot what is practically impervious to bullets, that can blow up, that can explode your powder magazines, your high explosives, at a distance of miles? The Mentanicals would enter your age, not to conquer man—they know little of him, regard him as an inferior creature, an evolutionary hand-over of premachine life—but to expand, take over your cities, to… to… What do I know of their idea of profit, of

self-gain and ambition, but doubtless they have it. Listen!"— The great head surged forward, the dark eyes fixed mine compellingly— "You must leap into your time machine before they can prevent, return to your own day and age, at once!"

"And leave you behind?"

"How can you take me with you? That is impossible. Besides I am weary of life, I have caused too much woe and misery to want to live. The Mentanicals refuse me the boon of death, but you will not refuse. That gun in your hand— there are bullets in it yet— one of them here—"

"No! no!"

"For God's sake, be merciful!"

"I will return for you."

"You must never return! Do you hear me? Not a second time would you escape. Perhaps it is too late to escape now! Up! up with your gun! Aim at the crystal. Its breaking brings me peace and will distract attention while you leap into your machine. Now! now!"

There was nothing else to do; I saw that in a flash; already the Mentanicals were gliding towards me and once in their invisible grip… I threw up my hand; the gun spoke with a roar; I hear a tinkling crash as of glass, and the same instant vaulted into the seat of the time machine.

It was a close thing, I can tell you, a mighty close thing. They came for me with a rush. The high sides of the passenger-seat protected me for a moment from their deadly touch, but I felt the time machine sway under it, tilt over. In that split second before my hand closed on the lever I saw it all, the rushing Mentanicals, the shattered glass, Bane Borgson sinking into the apathy of death, his great head lolling; the I pulled the lever, pulled it back to Zero!

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CAPTAIN Bronson stood up. He looked at us bleakly. "You know the rest. The time machine has been moved. In coming back a portion of it must have materialized inside of a solid— the old stone wall— and caused an explosion. But what I want to know— what has been bothering me at times— did I do right to shoot Bane Borgson? I might have escaped without that."

"He wanted to die," said the Doctor at length.

Olson Smith inclined his head. "I don't see what else you could have done."

"To have left him there," I said. "to a life in death, after all those years, no, no, that would have been too horrible!"

Bronson drew a deep breath. "That was my own thought; but I am glad you agree…"

He poured himself a drink.

"If I hadn't seen you disappear with my own eyes," said the Doctor.

"I don't blame you," said Bronson; "the whole thing sonds like a pipe-dream."

"A pipe-dream," I murmured.

"But there is another angle to it," said Bronson grimly. "What Bane Borgson said about the time-radio influencing the building of the time machine and compelling my coming. Oh, he may have been raving, poor devil, or mistaken, but remember what the Professor said that night at the dinner, about something whispering in his brain? We'll have to guard against that."

The Doctor said sadly: "Nothing'll whisper to the Professor anymore, Captain."

"What do you mean?"

"I forgot that we'd kept it from you."

"Kept what?"

"The news of the accident. On that night you took your trip into the future, the time machine struck Professor Stringer on the head."

"He is dead?"

"Unfortunately, no. But his brain is affected. The Professor will never be the same again."

Thus the strange and incredible story ends. There is only this to add: Olson Smith is devoting his vast fortune and influence to fighting the manufacture of mechanical brain-cells for machines. "What do you expect to do," I demand, "change the future?"

"Perhaps," he answers. "One never knows until he tries."

So he goes up and down the country, the world, buying up inventions, chemical processes. It has become a mission with him, a mania. But the hands of the future are not changed by invididuals but by social forces, and the genius of man seems determined to lead him into a more mechanized world.

As for the rest, time alone will tell.

12: The Distortion Out Of Space

Weird Tales, Aug 1934

BACK OF Bear Mountain the meteor fell that night. Jim Blake and I saw it falling through the sky. As large as a small balloon it was and trailed a fiery tail. We knew it struck earth within a few miles of our camp, and later we saw the glare of a fire dully lighting the heavens. Timber is sparse on the farther slope of Bear Mountain, and what little there is of it is stunted and grows in patches, with wide intervals of barren and rocky ground. The fire did not spread to any extent and soon burned itself out.

Seated by our campfire we talked of meteoroids, those casual visitants from outer space which are usually small and consumed by heat on entering earth's atmosphere. Jim spoke of the huge one that had fallen in northern Arizona be fore the coming of the white man; and of another, more recent, which fell in Siberia.

"Fortunately," he said, "meteors do little damage; but if a large one were to strike a densely populated area, I shudder to think of the destruction to life and property. Ancient cities may have been blotted out in some such catastrophe. I don't believe that this one we just saw fell anywhere near Simpson's ranch."

"No," I said, "it hit too far north. Had it landed in the valley we couldn't have seen the reflection of the fire it started. We're lucky it struck no handier to us.

The next morning, full of curiosity, we climbed to the crest of the mountain, a distance of perhaps two miles. Bear Mountain is really a distinctive hog'sback of some height, with more rugged and higher mountain peaks around and beyond it. No timber grows on the summit, which, save for tufts of bear-grass and yucca, is rocky and bare. Looking down the farther side from the eminence attained, we saw that an area of hillside was blasted and still smoking. The meteor, however, had buried itself out of sight in earth and rock, leaving a deep aater some yards in extent.

About three miles away, in the small valley below, lay Henry Simpson's ranch, seemingly undamaged. Henry was a licensed guide, and when he went into the mountains after deer, we made his place our headquarters. Henry was not visible as we approached, nor his wife; and a certain uneasiness hastened our steps when we perceived that a portion of the house-roof — the house was built of adobe two stories high and had a slightly pitched roof made of rafters across which corrugated iron strips were nailed—was twisted and rent.

"Good heavens!" said Jim; "I hope a fragment of that meteorite hasn't done any damage here."

Leaving the burros to shift for themselves, we rushed into the house. "Hey, Henry!" I shouted. "Henry! Henry!"

Never shall I forget the sight of Henry Simpson's face as he came tottering down the broad stairs. Though it was eight o'clock in the morning, he still wore pajamas. His gray hair was tousled, his eyes staring.

"Am I mad, dreaming?" he cried hoarsely.

He was a big man, all of six feet tall, not the ordinary mountaineer, and though over sixty years of age possessed of great physical strength. But now his shoulders sagged, he shook as if with palsy.

"For heaven's sake, what's the matter?" demanded Jim. "Where's your wife?"

Henry Simpson straightened himself with an eflFort.

"Give me a drink." Then he said strangely: "I'm in my right mind— of course I must be in my right mind— but how can that thing upstairs be possible?"

"What thing? What do you mean?"

"I don't know. I was sleeping soundly when the bright light wakened me. That was Iasi, night, hours and hours ago. Something crashed into the house."

"A piece of the meteorite," said Jim, looking at me.

"Meteorite?"

"One fell last night on Bear Mountain. We saw it fall."

Henry Simpson lifted a gray face. "It may have been that."

"You wakened, you say?"

"Yes, with a cry of fear. I thought the place had been struck by lightning, 'Lydia!' I screamed, thinking of my wife. But Lydia never answered. The bright light had blinded me. At first I could see nothing. Then my vision cleared. Still I could see nothing— though the room wasn't dark."

"What!"

"Nothing, I tell you. No room, no walls, no furniture; only whichever way I looked, emptiness. I had leapt from bed in my first waking moments and couldn't find it again. I walked and walked, I tell you, and ran and ran; but the bed had disappeared, the room had disappeared. It was like a nightmare. I tried to wake up. I was on my hands and knees, crawling, when someone shouted my name. I crawled toward the sound of that voice, and suddenly I was in the hallway above, outside my room door. I dared not look back. I was afraid, I tell you, afraid. I came down the steps."

He paused, wavered. We caught him and eased his body down on a sofa.

"For God's sake," he whispered, "go find my wife."

Jim said soothingly: "There, there, sir, your wife is all right." He motioned me imperatively with his hand. "Go out to our cabin. Bill, and bring me my bag."

I DID as he bade. Jim was a practising physician and never travelled without his professional kit. He dissolved a morphine tablet, filled a hypodermic, and shot its contents into Simpson's arm. In a few minutes, the old man sighed, relaxed, and fell into heavy slumber. "Look," said Jim, pointing.

The soles of Simpson's feet were bruised, bleeding, the pajamas shredded at the knees, the knees lacerated.

"He didn't dream it," muttered Jim at lengtli. "He's been walking and aawling, all right."

We stared at each other. "But, good Lord, man!" I exclaimed.

"I know," said Jim. He straightened up. "There's something strange here. I'm going upstairs. Are you coming?"

Together we mounted to the hall above. I didn't know what we expected to find. I remember wondering if Simpson had done away with his wife and was trying to act crazy. Then I recollected that both Jim and I had observed the damage to the roof. Something had struck the house. Perhaps that something had killed Mrs. Simpson. She was an energetic woman, a few years younger than her husband, and not the sort to be lying quietly abed at such an hour.

Filled with misgivings, we reached the landing above and stared down the corridor. 'The corridor was well lighted by means of a large window at its extreme end. Two rooms opened off this corridor, one on each side. The doors to both were ajar.

The first room into which we glanced was a kind of writing-room and library. I have said that Simpson was no ordinary moxmtaineer. As a matter of fact, he was a man who read widely and kept abreast of the better publications in current literature.

The second room was the bedchamber. Its prosaic door— made of smoothed planks— swung outward. It swung toward us, half open, and in the narrow corridor we had to draw it still further open to pass. Then:

"My God!" said Jim.

Rooted to the floor, we both stared. Never shall I forget the sheer astonishment of that moment. For beyond the door, where a bedroom should have been, there was

"Oh, it's impossible!" I muttered.

I looked away. Yes, I was in a narrow corridor, a house. Then I glanced back, and the effect was that of gazing into the emptiness of illimitable space. My trembling fingers gripped Jim's arm. I am not easily terrified. Men of my

calling— aviation— have to possess steady nerves. Yet there was something so strange so weird about the sight that I confess to a wave of fear. The space stretched away on all sides beyond that door, as space stretches away from one who, lying on his back on a clear day, stares at the sky. But this space was not bright with sunlight. It was a gloomy space, gray, intimidating; a space in which no stars or moon or sun were discernible. And it was a space that had— aside from its gloom— a quality of indirectness....

"Jim," I whispered hoarsely, "do you see it too?"

"Yes, Bill, yes."

"What does it mean?"

"I don't know. An optical illusion, perhaps. Something has upset the perspective in that room."

"Upset?"

"I'm trying to think."

He brooded a moment. Though a practising physician, Jim is interested in physics and higher mathematics. His papers on the relativity theory have appeared in many scientific journals.

"Space," he said, "has no existence aside from matter. You know that. Nor aside from time." He gestured quickly. "There's Einstein's concept of matter being a kink in space, of a universe at once finite and yet infinite. It's all abstruse and hard to grasp." He shook his head. "But in outer space, far beyond the reach of our most powerful telescopes, things may not function exactly as they do on earth. Laws may vary, phenomena the direct opposite of what we are accustomed to may exist."

His voice sank. I stared at him, fascinated.

"And that meteoroid from God knows where!" He paused a moment. "I am positive that this phenomenon we witness is connected with it. Something came to earth in that meteor and has lodged in this room, something possessing alien properties, that is able to distort, warp—" His voice died away.

I stared fearfully through the open door. "Good heavens," I said, "what can it be? What would have the power to create such an illusion?"

"If it is an illusion," muttered Jim.

"Perhaps it is no more an illusion than the environment in which we have our being and which we scarcely question. Don't forget that Simpson wandered through it for hours. Oh, it sounds fantastic, impossible, I know, and at first I believed he was raving; but now... now…"

He straightened abruptly. "Mrs. Simpson is somewhere in that room, in that incredible space, perhaps wandering about, lost, frightened. I'm going in."

I pleaded with him to wait, to reconsider. "If you go. I'll go too," I said.

He loosened my grip. "No, you must stay by the door to guide me with your voice."

D espite my further protestations, he stepped through the doorway. In doing so it seemed that he must fall into an eternity of nothing.

"Jim!" I called fearfully. He glanced back, but whether he heard my voice I could not say. Afterward he said he hadn't.

It was weird to watch him walking— a lone figure in the midst of infinity. I tell you it was the weirdest and most incredible sight the eye of man has ever seen. "I must be asleep, dreaming," I thought; "this can't be real."

I had to glance away, to assure myself by a sight of the hall that I was actually awake. The room at most was only thirty; feet from door to wall; yet Jim went on and on, down an everlasting vista of gray distance, until his figure began to shorten, dwindle. Again I screamed, "Jim! Jim! Come back, Jim!" But in the very moment of my saeaming, his figure flickered, went out, and in all the vast lonely reaches of that gloomy void, nowhere was he to be seen— nowhere!

I wonder if anyone can imagine a tithe of the emotions which swept over me at that moment. I crouched by the doorway to that incredible room, a prey to the most horrible fears and surmises. Anon I called out, "Jim! Jim!" but no voice ever replied, no familiar figure loomed on my sight.

The sun was high overhead when I went heavily down the stairs and out into the open. Simpson was still sleeping on the couch, the sleep of exhaustion. I remembered that he had spoken of hearing our voices calling him as he wandered through gray space, and it came over me as ominous and suggestive of disaster that my voice had, apparently, never reached Jim's ears, that no sound had come to my own ears out of the weird depths.

After the long hours of watching in the narrow corridor, of staring into alien space, it was with an inexpressible feeling of relief, of having escaped something horrible and abnormal, that I greeted the sun-drenched day. The burros were standing with drooping heads in the shade of a live-oak tree. Quite methodically I relieved them of their packs; then I filled and lit my pipe, doing everything slowly, carefully, as if aware of the need for restraint, calmness. On such little things does a man's sanity often depend. And all the time I stared at the house, at the upper portion of it where the uncanny room lay. Certain cracks showed in its walls and the roof above was twisted and tom. I asked myself, how was this thing possible? How, within the narrow confines of a single room, could the phenomenon of infinite space exist? Einstein, Eddington, Jeans— I had read their theories, and Jim might be correct, but the strangeness of it, the horror! You're mad. Bill, I said to myself, mad, mad! But there were the burros, there was the house. A scarlet tanager soared by, a

hawk wheeled overhead, a covey of ring-necked mountain quail scuttled through tangled brush. No, I wasn't nud, I couldn't be dreaming, and Jim— Jim was somewhere in that accursed room, that distortion out of space, lost, wandering!

IT WAS the most courageous thing I ever did in my life— to re-enter that house, climb those stairs. I had to force myself to do it, for I was desperately afraid and my feet dragged. But Simpson's ranch was in a lonely place, the nearest town or neighbor miles distant. It would take hours to fetch help, and of what use would it be when it did arrive? Besides, Bill needed aid, now, at once.

Though every nerve and fiber of my body rebelled at the thought, I fastened the end of a rope to a nail driven in the hall floor and stepped through the doorway. Instantly I was engulfed by endless space. It was a terrifying sensation. So far as I could see, my feet rested on nothing. Endless distance was below me as well as above. Sick and giddy, I paused and looked back, but the doorway had vanished. Only the coil of rope in my hands, and the heavy pistol in my belt, saved me from giving way to utter panic.

Slowly I paid out the rope as I advanced. At first it stretched into infinity like a sinuous serpent. Then suddenly all but a few yards of it disappeared. Fearfully I tugged at the end in my hands. It .resisted the tug. The rope was still there, even if invisible to my eyes, every inch of it paid out; yet I was no nearer the confines of that room. Standing there with emptiness above, around, below me.

I knew the meaning of utter desolation, of fear and loneliness. This way and that I groped, at the end of my tether. Somewhere Jim must be searching and groping too. "JimJ" I shouted; and miraculously enough, in my very ear it seemed, Jim's voice bellowed, "Bill! Bill! Is that you. Bill?"

"Yes," I almost sobbed. "Where are you, Jim?"

"I don't know. This place has me bewildered. I've been wandering around for hours. Listen, Bill; everything is out of focus here, matter warped, light curved. Can you hear me. Bill?"

"Yes, yes. I'm here too, clinging to the end of a rope that leads to the door. If you could follow the sound of my voice "

"I'm trying to do that. We must be very close to each other. Bill " His voice grew faint, distant.

"Here!" I shouted, "here!"

Far off I heard his voice calling, receding.

"For God's sake, Jim, this way, this way!"

Suddenly the uncanny space appeared to shift, to eddy— I can describe what occurred in no other fashion— and for a moment in remote distance I saw Jim's figure. It was toiling up an endless hill, away from me; up, up; a black dot against an immensity of nothing. Then the dot flickered, went out, and he was gone. Sick with nightmarish horror, I sank to my knees, and even as I did so the realization of another disaster made my heart leap suffocatingly to my throat. In the excitement of trying to attract Jim's attention, I had dropped hold of the rope!

Panic leapt at me, sought to overwhelm me, but I fought it back. Keep calm, I told myself; don't move, don't lose your head; the rope must be lying at your feet. But though I felt carefully on all sides, I could not locate it. I tried to recollect if I had moved from my original position. Probably I had taken a step or two away from it, but in what direction? Hopeless to ask. In that infernal distortion of space and matter, there was nothing by which to determine direction. Yet I did not, I could not, abandon hope. The rope was my only guide to the outer world, the world of normal phenomena and life.

This way and that I searched, wildly, frantically, but to no purpose. At last I forced myself to stand quite still, closing my eyes to shut out the weird void. My brain functioned chaotically. Lost in a thirty-foot room, Jim, myself, and a woman, unable to locate one another— the thing was impossible, incredible. With trembling fingers I took out my pipe, pressed tobacco in the charred bowl and applied a match. Thank God for nicotine! My thoughts flowed more clearly. Incredible or not, here I was, neither mad. nor dreaming. Some quirk of circumstance had permitted Simpson to stagger from the web of illusion, but that quirk had evidently been one in a thousand. Jim and I might go wandering through alien depths until we died of hunger and exhaustion.

I OPENED my eyes. The gray clarity of space— a clarity of subtle indirection— still hemmed me in. Somewhere within a few feet of where I stood— as distance is computed in a three-dimensional world— Jim must be walking or standing. But this space was not three-dimensional. It was a weird dimension from outside the solar system which the mind of man could never hope to understand or grasp. And it was terrifying to reflect that within its depths Jim and I might be separated by thousands of miles and yet be cheek by jowl.

I walked on. I could not stand still for ever. God, I thought, there must be a way out of this horrible place, there must be! Ever and anon I called Jim's name. After a while I glanced at my watch, but it had ceased to run. Every muscle in my body began to ache, and thirst was adding its tortures to those of

the mind. "Jim!" I cried hoarsely, again and again, but silence pressed in on me imtil I felt like screaming.

Conceive of it if you can. Though I walked on matter firm enough to the feet, seemingly space stretched below as well as above. Sometimes I had the illusion of being inverted, of walking head-downward. There was an uncanny sensation of being translated from spot to spot without the need of intermediate action. God! I prayed inwardly, God! I sank to my knees, pressing my hands over my eyes. But of what use was that? Of what use was anything? I staggered to my feet, fighting the deadly fear gnawing at my heart, and forced myself to walk slowly, without haste, counting the steps, one, two, three....

When it was I first noticed the shimmering radiation, I can not say. Like heat radiation it was, only more subtle, like waves of heat rising from an open furnace. I rubbed my eyes, I stared tensely. Yes, waves of energy were being diffused from some invisible source. Far off in the illimitable depths of space I saw them pulsing; but I soon perceived that I was fated— like a satellite fixed in its groove— to travel in a vast circle of which they were the center.

And perhaps in that direction lay the door!

Filled with despair I again sank to my knees, and kneeling I thought drearily, "This is the end, there is no way out," and calmer than I had been for hours — there is a calmness of despair, a fatalistic giving over of struggle— I raised my head and looked apathetically around.

Strange, strange; weird and strange. Could this be real, was I myself? Could an immensity of nothing lie within a thirty-foot radius, be caused by something out of space, something brought by the meteor, something able to distort, warp?

Distort, warp!

With an oath of dawning comprehension I leapt to my feet and glared at the shimmering radiation. Why couldn't I approach it? What strange and invisible force forbade? Was it because the source of this incredible space lay lurking there? Oh, I was mad, I tell you, a little insane, yet withal possessed of a certain coolness and clarity of thought. I drew the heavy pistol from its holster. A phrase of Jim's kept running through my head: Vibration, vibration, everything is varying rates of vibration. Yet for a moment I hesitated. Besides myself, in this incredible space two others were lost, and what if I were to shoot either of them? Better that, I told myself, than to perish without a struggle.

I raised the pistol. The shimmering radiation was something deadly, inimical, the diffusing waves of energy were loathsome tentacles reaching out to slay.

"Damn you," I muttered, "take that— and that!"

I pulled the trigger.

OF WHAT followed I possess but a kaleidoscopic and chaotic memory. The gray void seemed to breathe in and out. Alternately I saw space and room, room and space; and leering at me through the interstices of this bewildering change something indescribably loathsome, something that lurked at the center of a crystal ball my shots had perforated. Through the bullet-holes in this crystal a slow vapor oozed, and as it oozed, the creature inside of the ball struggled and writhed; and as it struggled I had the illusion of being lifted in and out, in and out; into the room, out into empty space. Then suddenly the crystal ball shivered and broke; I heard it break with a tinkling as of glass; the luminous vapor escaped in a swirl, the gray void vanished, and sick and giddy I found myself definitely encompassed by the walls of a room and within a yard of the writhing monstrosity.

As I stood with rooted feet, too dazed to move, the monstrosity reared. I saw it now in all its hideousness. A spidery thing it was, and yet not a spider. Up it feared, up, four feet in the air, its saucerlike eyes goggling out at me, its hairy paws reaching. Sick with terror, I was swept forward into the embrace of the loathsome creature. Then happened that which I can never forget till my dying day, so strange it was, so weird. Imagination, you say, the fantastic thoughts of a temporarily disordered mind. Perhaps, perhaps; but suddenly I seemed to know— know beyond a doubt— that this spiderlike visitant from outer space was an intelligent, reasoning being. Those eyes— they seemed to bore into the innermost recesses of my brain, seemed to establish a species of communication between myself and tlie intelligence back of them. It was not a, malignant intelligence— I realized that— but in comparison to myself something god-like, remote. And yet it was a mortal intelligence. My bullets had shattered its protective covering, had reached to its vulnerable body, and as it held me to itself, it was in the very throes of dissolution. All this I sensed, all this it told me; not through language, but through some subtle process of picture transference which it is hopeless for me to attempt to explain. I seemed to see a gray, weird place where delicate traceries were spun and silver devices shimmered and shone— the habitat of the strange visitant from outer space. Perhaps the receiving-cells of my brain were not developed enough to receive all the impressions it tried to convey.

Nothing was clear, distinct, nothing definite. I had the agonizing consciousness that much was slipping through my brain, uncorrelated, unregistered. But a meteoroid was hurtling through the blackness of space— and I saw that meteoroid. I saw it falling to earth. I saw a portion of it swing clear, aash through the roof of Simpson's house and lodge in the bedroom.

And I saw the strange visitant from outside our universe utilize the incredible power he possessed to distort space, iron out the kinks of nutter in it, veil himself in immensity while studying his alien surroundings.

And then all his expiring emotions seemed to rush over me in a flood and I felt— felt— what he was thinking. He had nude a journey from one star system to another, he bad landed safely on earth, a trillion, trillion light-years distant, but never would he return to his own planet to tell of his success— never, never! All this I seemed to understand, to grasp, in a split second or so, his loneliness and pain, his terrible nostalgia; then the hairy paws relaxed their grip, the hideous body collapsed in on itself, and as I stared at it sprawling on the floor, I was suddenly conscious of Mrs. Simpson crouching, unharmed, in one comer of the room, of Jim standing beside me, clutching my arm.

"Bill," he said hoarsely, "are you hurt.?" And then in a whisper, "What is it? What is it?"

"I don't know," I returned chokingly, "I don't know. But whatever it is, it is dead now— the Distortion out of Space."

And unaccountably I buried my face in my hands and began to weep.

END