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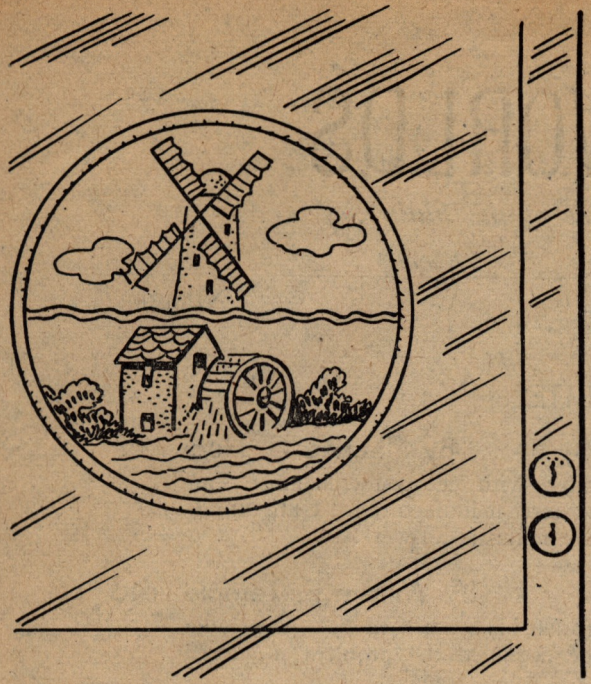


THE MILL OF THE GODS

By MAURICE G. HUGI

Cheap merchandise flooded the world, its source of manufacture a mystery. In solving the mystery, Intelligence officers stumbled across an even greater secret.

Prologue.

1*st May*, 1983.

HOWARD SPRINGER leant back in his capacious chair and glowered at the two most inoffensive objects on his desk—a one-pound glass jar of "Luvella Syrup" and a one-pound pot of "Kwalade —the Quality Marmalade."

As the head of Britain's biggest jam manufacturers, ensconced in the luxurious apartment labelled "Managing Director," Howard Springer, of Springers Ltd., should have found life both pleasant and interesting. Which he had until the advent of the two products mentioned hit the market and began a vicious gnawing into the sales of Springers Ltd.

It seemed unreasonable that after one hundred years of progressive and honest trading, Springers should have to retire in the face of an upstart's opposition. But sales had dropped thirty per cent. and were still falling steadily. Howard Springer flipped the inter-communicator switch on his desk.

"Send Mr. Martin and Mr. Nicholls to me," he snapped and switched off before his secretary could reply.

He picked up the jar of clear, pale straw-coloured syrup and for the hundredth time studied the ornate black and silver label.

"Luvella Syrup—the new tea-time confection. Marketed by Mills (Gt. Britain) Ltd. Subsidiary of Mills Inc." Underneath the legend was a trade mark—a windmill and a water wheel. He thumped the jar on his desk as his secretary ushered in two men, one of whom wore a white coat overall.

"Well?" Springer queried. "What have you found out?"

The two men glanced at each other, then spoke together.

"One at a time, please," Springer growled. "You first, Martin."

The white-coated, bespectacled young man who acted as chief chemist and analyst to the firm cleared his throat with a nervous cough.

"To be quite honest, sir, not a thing. The syrup may be a synthetic product, but if it is I'm at a loss to know any method of production commercially or otherwise. If it isn't synthetic, then a new type of sugar cane has been developed. The Kwalade is a different proposition altogether. It is a pure fruit product with an addition of Luvella syrup. It seems to be manufactured from a species of unidentifiable citrus fruit. Neither the rind nor the pulp is recognisable under the microscope; the cellular structure is akin to that of the citrus species, but growth and development, flavour and chemical analysis is absolutely new. I venture to say it is a completely new fruit and not a horticultural hybrid."

"You, Nicholls?"

"I give up!" Nicholls threw up his hands in a gesture of despair. "I carried out your orders, Mr. Springer, and have to admit complete failure. I engaged an investigator. The Mills factory is, as you know, just outside Northampton. The investigator reports that nothing whatever is manufactured there; it's purely a packing and distributing centre. The syrup arrives in forty gallon steel drums and their queer marmalade in 280 pound barrels."

"This stuff must be made somewhere!" Howard Springer snapped, "and that was what I detailed you to find out."

Nicholls nodded. "It is not made in this country. Mills have a dozen cargo steamers running back and

forth from Freetown, Sierra Leone on the West African coast. Where the plantations are, Heaven alone knows. Not in British territory; maybe French Ivory Coast, Wasulu, French Guiana, Liberia, anywhere you like! And here's something else, Mr. Springer. They call themselves Mills Incorporated, which is typically American. We know they have depots in Savannah, New York, Seattle, San Francisco, Dallas and Denver, which neatly divides the United States into six distributing areas. As in England, nothing is manufactured at these depots. Hyams, on International Canneries in Milwaukee, tells me that everything arrives in drums and barrels via 'Frisco and New York from South America. For 'Frisco from Tamaco in Colombia and New York from La Mania in French Guiana."

"What have we here?" Springer got up and studied a map of the world hanging on and nearly covering an entire wall of his office. "Curious that all ports of shipment are close to the borders of other countries and that all these countries are in a backward state of development. No rails, no roads, no power. Yet Mills can grow or manufacture enough to flood world markets." He paused thoughtfully. Then he turned to his executives. "Any suggestions, gentlemen?"

"One," Martin replied. He paused, evidently picking his words with care. "Kwalade. You realise, sir, that this so-called marmalade is habit forming, like a drug; that once a person has eaten a jar or two they have lost all liking for an ordinary orange marmalade. I can't detect any drug in its composition. Luvella, too, is habit forming; mind you, I don't say there's any dangerous, cumulative after effects, but it is the main reason why the public, having once sampled Mills products, desert us."

"But who are Mills Incorporated?" Springer asked Nicholls. The sales manager shrugged helplessly.

"In England a board of half-a-dozen directors," he replied. "All small stock holders with fat directors' salaries. Unimpeachable characters. Take their orders from somebody way up above and hidden from sight. Sound business men who were let in on the ground floor of a genuine, money spinning business. Beyond that a blank wall, absolutely impossible to penetrate!"

"It's a swine!" Springer muttered viciously and glared at the two jars on his desk.

August 4th, 1984.

IN THE long, high-ceilinged and walnut panelled room sat some twenty-five grave looking men. At the head of the table, occupying the chairman's seat, was the Prime Minister, Sir Arthur Wrigley. At his right hand, Edgar Mundley, United States Ambassador to the Court of St. James, tapped the blotter before him impatiently. The "go-getter" in him chafed at the slow, ponderous course of the debate.

". . . So when Mr. Springer"—here the Prime Minister gave Howard Springer, who sat half way down the long table, a courtly bow—"did approach the authorities some fifteen months ago, regarding the mysterious Mills organisation we did not attach great importance to his revelations. They seemed then the grouch of a manufacturer who had found his competitors had stolen a perfectly legitimate march on him.

"There was no question of infringing trade marks or violating the patent laws; nothing discreditable, let alone actionable at law. Now things have reached a stage where we must act. Before I continue I would like the Earl of Tiverton to address you, gentlemen."

The noble earl, Europe's greatest car manufacturer, rose. He was portly, faultlessly clad, and very, very impressive in demeanour. He surveyed his listeners coldly and impassively.

"I do not think I will be accused of bombast when I say I am one of the largest manufacturers of cars in the world. I control nine of the greatest car factories in Europe; my resources are well nigh inexhaustible; my technicians and products without peer. For long the Tiverton Six has been one of the best selling cars in the world. A fourteen horsepower, six cylinder saloon, incorporating the soundest design, materials and workmanship, coupled with the most luxurious coach work, and marketed at the extraordinary low price of £225!"

His lordship paused to let this feat of enterprise and industry sink in.

"And to-day, all this work, all this manufacturing ability is set at nought! Mills Incorporated have for the last twelve months marketed a sixteen horsepower saloon, which I, with my vast resources, could not produce under £350, for the paltry sum of £75!—£350 for £75! It is impossible and incredible. Every man his own luxury car! Motoring for the million with a vengeance!

"And that is not all. Apart from the excellence of design, materials and workmanship, these cars—the Mills Six—incorporate a number of unique features. For instance, we have——"

"I thank your lordship," the Prime Minister cut in firmly. The Earl of Tiverton sat down reluctantly, obviously upset at this abrupt termination just as he was getting into his stride. "I will ask his Excellency, the American Ambassador to continue the discussion."

Edgar Mundley launched forth in clipped, yet cultured tones:

"We've heard Mr. Springer and the Earl of Tiverton. It is a far cry from jam to motor-cars, but Mills Incorporated take it in their stride. The United States, like this country, is officially becoming more than a little perturbed. We founded a large and prosperous nation upon certain natural resources and native ability. Oil for one, mass production for another. All the big car corporations

have been forced to amalgamate to combat Mills Incorporated. These firms are producing a really fine car for a paltry five hundred dollars a time—I think even his lordship will agree there." Tiverton gave a grunt, but whether it was approval or otherwise no one troubled to find out. " But Mills slapped a three fifty dollar price tag on their automobiles and it is hopeless to try and compete. Now, his lordship was about to describe some of the unique features in the cars. Their latest improvement is the last straw as far as Washington is concerned. The Mills Six requires no petrol!

" Just a simple little box of welded steel, no larger than a twenty cigarette pack, clapped in place of the usual carburettor. And it spells utter ruin for the oil industry!"

" Have your people examined the construction of this petrol eliminating device, your Excellency?" someone asked.

" Sure. So far it's cost us nineteen lives. Every time we try to dismantle one of these gadgets there is a violent explosion. So we tried to X-ray the interior construction. Failure! The casing has been coated on the inside with some sort of dope which fogs photographic plates and also renders all form of ray penetration impossible."

The Ambassador resumed his seat and the next speaker was a Dr. Dickens, attached to the Home Office.

" The Prime Minister," he began, continually combing his long, white hair as he spoke, " asked me to address you and give my opinion as a scientist upon this problem. While there are many aspects of highly intriguing and, needless to say, technical nature, I have in mind one problem, or should I say pointer? that may be of value in later deliberations.

" We have heard Mr. Springer read a brief report his analyst prepared. A totally new fruit and a new kind of sugar cane which are definitely *not* horticultural hybrids.

" From the Earl of Tiverton the excellence of the Mills Six in design and construction. From his Excellency, the American Ambassador, the baffling construction of the petrol eliminating device.

" Now, in modern science, and by that I mean the last hundred years at least, invention and science has become increasingly complex. It is not generally realised that most inventions are the work of a group of specialists. No one man can invent a new machine or process unaided. The problems encountered need the consideration and advice of many experts, all specialists in their particular fields. Certainly, you can invent a new kind of collar stud or cigarette lighter unaided, but not a major invention. Take his lordship's motor-car. The average car contains some 16,000 parts! Each of these parts to be designed by a competent draughtsman; to be materially specified by a metallurgist; to be calculated for stress and strain by mathematicians. And all that before the first technicians cut a pattern or make a jig or a template before production commences.

" So we are faced with this: A botanist of high repute to conceive these strange and exotic condiments that are the bane of Mr. Springer's existence. Engineer and designer, metallurgist and mathematician to produce these marvellously cheap cars; scientist and chemist and engineers to conceive the petrol eliminating instrument."

Dr. Dickens paused, then added dramatically:

" Gentlemen, seek not one man, but a hundred. Seek not one big capitalist, but a group of capitalists whose resources must run to a hundred million pounds to be world dominant. Seek not an iron mine or a plantation, but the entire natural resources of a really large nation!"

I.

" WELL, there's the set-up, Lawrence," said Colonel Freeman. " You will be but one of a hundred independent investigators. Every country in the world is co-operating with us and the United States in trying to fathom where Mills manufacture their stuff. The French have sent some of their investigators to Tibet; they believe it is an Indian attempt to break Western civilisation to free the East, and since we've industrialised much of India there are men, money and materials in sufficiency. But the population drift to Tibet is nil! The German idiots have dug up the ancient Bolshevik bogey, ignoring the fact that the U.S.S.R. are in the same plight. There are some in America who think it is a British Empire scheme for world domination, and not a few half-wits in this country who whisper it's the United States bid for a huge colonial empire. In short, if we don't soon find out the source of Mills productions there'll be a world war that will make the one in the 1940's a nursery pastime!"

Colonel Freeman stood up to signify that the interview was at an end. " Parker, Wilson and Headlam will assist you. Good-bye, and good luck. Remember, you've got three months to solve the problem. If you don't succeed, then it's the Deluge!"

As Lawrence entered his flat his manservant came from the sitting-room. " The afternoon mail, sir," he said, handing a few letters and receiving his master's hat in exchange.

" Thanks, Charles. If there are any callers, I'm out." Lawrence scanned his mail with little interest. Then one item caught his whole attention. " . . . So Freddie and I are going over the marvellous Mills factory at Wolverhampton on Friday afternoon. . . ." He chewed his lower lip thoughtfully. He had heard that these Mills depots were open to the public on certain days. Now his married sister was going to visit one next Friday. H'm, very interesting. He crossed over to the telephone, then paused. Instead, he went out, grabbed his hat and entered a call-box just round the corner. That meant if anyone tried to trace the call back they would be un-

lucky. He dialled a number and draped his handkerchief over the viewplate of the televiewer.

"Is that Mills Incorporated? Tell me, is the public admitted to your Wolverhampton depot on Fridays?" he asked. "No? Tuesdays, two till five in the afternoon. I understand. Write to Head Office for a ticket to view. Thanks so much."

Then he 'phoned his sister. "Got your letter, Cicely. How about including your brother in that run to Mills place at Wolverhampton, old dear?"

"Holy mackerel, George! And since when have you been interested in industry?" she exclaimed, then paused hesitantly. "I expect it'll be all right. You see, we're going with one of the directors. Old Peabody; you know him, don't you? One of Freddie's club friends."

Lawrence knew the elderly gentleman—a "something in the city" type of individual.

"If you don't want me——" Lawrence said huffily. He was a sound enough psychologist to know that his pretended offence would work, for the reply came at once: "Don't be silly, darling. Come by all means. We'll pick you up."

Sure enough, Friday afternoon Cicely and Freddie called for Lawrence in their trim Tiverton Six. Ten minutes later they pulled up outside the Peabody mansion at Hampstead.

Old Peabody seemed somewhat put out by Lawrence's presence, but he made the best of it. Freddie drove in his usual style, as if he were going to a fire, and they sped across the pleasant green of the Midlands at whirlwind pace. As they proceeded Peabody unbent sufficiently to point out the many depots of Mills Inc., and only then did Lawrence realise the huge organisation that was so mysteriously scattered over the face of the land. There must have been thousands of depots throughout the world.

As they approached the tremendous building set in parkland just outside Wolverhampton Cicely exclaimed: "What a tremendous factory, Mr. Peabody!"

"Not a factory, dear lady, not a factory," Peabody replied fruitily. "Merely an assembling and despatching depot. Our cars are all imported piecemeal and assembled here."

"Where do you manufacture the cars, then?" Lawrence asked.

"America, somewhere," the director waved a fat pink hand vaguely, but his jowls quivered anxiously lest Lawrence should pursue his query.

The depot was certainly enormous, covering, as it did, some twelve acres. And a busy sight it was: the thousands of workers at the great conveyor belts, assembling the cars from the huge stacks of parts around them. Everything machined to a fine degree of accuracy dropped into place without the slightest hesitation. At one end of a conveyor belt a chassis frame; at the other end a completed car being driven off by a tester to the track that was laid out in the park for its final fine adjustments.

Speed, efficiency, but no clue as to how these lovely machines could be produced for £75 apiece.

WITHOUT apparent effort, seeming by accident, Lawrence managed to break away from the sightseeing party. A door marked "PRIVATE" had caught his attention. It was half open and a long passage-way was visible. He slipped through and closed it lest he be observed by the workers in the assembly hall. The solid door cut off all exterior sounds and he cautiously approached the first door along the passage. He could hear a slight murmur of at least two people talking within. He moved to the next door—a typewriter clacking warned him that this room, too, was occupied. The third door down the passage, then. No sounds here, Lawrence thought, so here goes. He opened the door and cautiously looked in. An elderly, harsh featured man, seated at a desk reading some correspondence, looked up sharply. "Yes, what d'you want?"

"Beg pardon, sir. I was looking for Mr. Peabody," Lawrence replied glibly.

"Well, he's not here," the elderly man snapped, "and the next time knock at the door!"

"Sorry, sir," Lawrence said and hastily shut the door. A Tartar! The next door was slightly ajar and a cautious peep disclosed an empty room. On the door, in gilt letters, was a name: "Mr. E. Emery." The room was quite small, but cosy, measuring about 15 feet square, with a large window almost facing the door. Substantial office furniture and a dull red, thick pile carpet. Nothing of interest or revealing the slightest clue as to where Mills Inc. had their production plants. There were some letters on the blotter, but they were normal business correspondence relating to car agencies in Essex. At the end of the passage was a stout door fitted with two Yale locks. It was securely fastened and the only outstanding thing about the door was that it bore Mills Inc. trade mark—a windmill and a watermill in gold leaf. At left angles to this door was a glass panelled swing door, for at this point the corridor made a sharp left-angled bend.

Lawrence passed through the swing door and continued his tour of exploration. He was evidently in the administration block and here the corridor was lined with long glass windows showing extensive offices filled with clerks and all the paraphernalia of a modern big business. No one took any notice of him: he appeared to be but one of the hundreds of employees going about his lawful business. But for all his exploration he learned not a thing. Only one item—the doubly locked, insignia marked door.

"Ah, there you are. We've been looking everywhere for you!"

Lawrence spun round. It was Peabody, quivering and agitated who had spoken.

"I was so interested in the assembly hall that I must have dropped behind. Anyway, I missed you, saw an open door and thought you had gone that

way. I went through and thoroughly lost myself in these huge offices." Lawrence thought he had extricated himself with credit, but he could see that Peabody was still agitated and for some reason highly apprehensive about something.

That evening on his return to London he went to Colonel Freeman. At his request Freeman secured a large aerial photo of the Mills Inc. Car Depot at Wolverhampton.

With a little study Lawrence managed to identify the administrative block, connected to the main assembly hall by the "L" shaped building housing the executive staff. And one very curious feature emerged. The doubly locked door gave access to a tennis court in the grounds! But why double Yale locks on the *inside?*

IT was pitch dark, raining heavily and two o'clock in the morning. Not a night fit for a dog to be out—nor was there! But despite the inclement weather four men stumbled cautiously across the parkland, crossed the testing track of Mills Inc. car depot and skirted the main building.

"Good thing they don't run a night shift," one of the men muttered as he nearly fell over a tussock of coarse grass.

"Nevertheless, we can't be too cautious," another whispered. "There are bound to be night watchmen and probably firemen on patrol."

"Here, Headlam, you're the expert: this window, please."

The man addressed flicked a masked torch over the window frame. "No burglar alarms," he said, speaking softly. From a leather roll he extracted a short, thin blade of silver steel. Bare seconds' work, a faint click and the casement slid up quietly. Headlam dropped into the room. Lawrence scrambled after him, followed by Wilson and Parker.

Lawrence carefully eased the door open which normally shielded the unknown Mr. E. Emery. The corridor was dimly illuminated by a single bulb at the assembly shop door end.

"Parker, mount guard at the window. Wilson, you stay by that end door. Cosh anybody who comes. Headlam, you come with me." Lawrence gave his orders smoothly and decisively and padded soft foot to the door with the double Yale locks.

"Right, Headlam, get cracking."

The lock expert gave a brief, intent scrutiny of the two locks. His roll of tools was spread open in Lawrence's hands. Headlam selected a tool and worked in silence. For two long minutes he delicately probed the tumblers in the barrel. Then with a duplicate tool from his kit he tackled the lower lock. This was more obstinate, for he adjusted and readjusted the movable pegs on his instrument. At last his efforts were rewarded and turning the two picklocks together he pulled the door open. It swung out ponderously, as heavy and massive as the door to some bank vault or safe deposit.

"Laminated steel plates covered with wood on the corridor side," Headlam whispered.

Lawrence brushed him aside and risked the light of his powerful, unmasked torch. He gave a faint whistle of dismay and astonishment.

Facing him and some four feet away was a blank brick wall! The chamber was a bare six feet wide and all the walls were of bare brick! There was not a scrap of furniture in the chamber. The only things that were out of the ordinary was a copper coloured plate of metal set in the concrete floor and a corresponding plate directly overhead in the cement ceiling. Each plate was a rectangle exactly a square yard in size.

Lawrence dropped to one knee and tested the floor plate with his fingers. The metal was hard, cold and immovable. Its purpose was obscure. It was evidently not a trapdoor, since there was neither hinge nor catch. A glance round the bare chamber was equally disappointing; no wall buttons, switches, wheels or valves. No machinery—bare bricks and mortar.

"What do you make of this, Headlam?"

"Not a thing, sir," the lock expert replied, shaking his head. "Wait, it wouldn't be a lift, would it? You know, actuated by the weight of the body standing on it."

Lawrence stepped gingerly on to the plate, but nothing happened. It was as solid and steady as a rock.

"That's not the answer, evidently," Lawrence mused, speaking half to himself and half to Headlam. "Why the elaborate precautions, though? Steel door, double locks—it doesn't make sense." He gave the chamber another scrutiny. "They built the outer wall out of parallel on purpose to leave this gap. Nothing visible from the outside, either."

"Half a minute, chief," Headlam whispered. "This plate comes to within six inches of the door. If anyone enters, they must step on the plate. Now supposing they shut the door after them—perhaps the door operates the mechanism. It's a steel frame and a steel door: shut the door and you complete the circuit if it is electrical."

"It's an idea. But how are we going to reopen the door? The key holes are on the other side and there are no knobs or latches this side. Merely a handle to pull the door to."

"Hey, Wilson," Headlam softly called. "Come here. Close this door on us, count ten then re-open. It's all right, the picklocks are set for the tumblers; you won't do any damage."

Wilson obediently thrust the heavy, though beautifully balanced door shut. He began to count to ten, but before he reached the last number the closed door gave a soft "click" and swung open a couple of inches. He promptly hauled the door wide open.

The chamber was empty!

II.

FOR some moments the normally quick-witted Secret Service man's brain refused to function.

Then, deciding that the problem was too much for one head to solve, he called Parker. He gave a brief description of what had transpired. The thick-set, unloquacious man gave a faint "Huh?" then frowned in concentration. Finally he arrived at a conclusion.

"Follow 'em," he whispered. He pushed Wilson into the bare brick chamber. He extracted the picklocks and picked up Headlam's kit of burglar's tools and stuffed them into his topcoat pocket.

Pulling the door shut, he stood by Wilson's side in total darkness. As the door bolts shot home a pale violet glow illumined the tiny room. The plate on which the two men stood and the corresponding one overhead, seemed to shimmer and they felt a not unpleasing tingle pass through every fibre of their bodies. There was an instant breath of icy cold in the cell, which passed as soon as it was born.

Neither man spoke nor for one instance did their vigilance relax. Nothing else happened. The violet glow died away and, with a faint snap of the twin locks, the massive door swung open a couple of inches.

Wilson pushed the door wide and stepped back into the corridor. Parker followed. One of the office doors opened and Lawrence emerged. He stopped dead in his tracks and stared at his subordinates.

"Where the hell have you two been?" he whispered angrily. "I told you to stand by while Headlam and I were in the chamber."

"I did, chief," Wilson answered, looking very surprised. "When I opened the door you had gone. Say, how did you leave, anyway? You didn't pass me. Is there another way out?"

Lawrence gripped Wilson's arm savagely. "What's that you're saying? You never left your post? The chamber was empty?"

The two assistants nodded in unison. "Sure," Parker muttered. "Called me at once. You'd gone. Didn't come out through the door!"

Three men stared at each other, doubting their sanity. The thing was crazy—yet it had happened! Headlam came from an adjoining office, stared at his companions curiously and silently proffered a sheet of notepaper to Lawrence.

"I found this on a blotter. Read it, sir, and tell me if I'm going nuts!"

Lawrence, with Parker and Wilson looking over his shoulders, read the amazing epistle. It was typewritten on a sheet of Mills Inc. paper. No address was given—merely the symbolic trade mark of the firm.

"Kaldri 14th. Ruman 13251," they read. "Salute to the Moon Gods! Salute to Lord Kellman of Meorti! I have the pleasure to report that the trials of the Yoroti Beam Plane has exceeded our expectations. The simplified drive can now be manufactured in 192 operations and assembled in 15 stages. I humbly suggest to your Lunar Lordship that mass production should commence immediately. In anticipation I have organised Factory Unit 25 at Setuni for immediate production and also reserved 12,000 horgs for labour, including some 800 vardi's. Your worshipping slave, Ainoti. (Suvardi.)"

"Setuni?" Wilson murmured. "Isn't that in Japan? Sounds like a Japanese name."

Lawrence did not reply. His mind was racing ahead. The problems set by this strange letter did not seem to possess any solutions, yet solutions there must be, or the whole thing was a crazy hoax. If the first line was a date, then what people used this strange calendar? And the reference to the Moon Gods? What nation were moon worshippers? The only Earthly name was that of Kellman. Lawrence gave a start as a new train of thought began. Earthly name? Was this letter of unearthly origin? Preposterous! Yet what other explanation would cover the facts? Then another factor cropped up. Parker tugged at his arm and silently pointed to the office door facing them. It was the unknown Mr. Emery's door. But Mr. Emery's name no longer decorated the panel. In gold letters was: "Lunar Lord Fresnay"!

Yet, in every respect the corridor and the view of the general offices through the glass panelled swing doors just round the corner was identical! Also, two doors of the private offices were emblazoned with devices not unlike Chinese ideographs. Ideographs which had not been there before.

"Half a minute," Headlam whispered. He entered what had formerly been Mr. Emery's office. The others followed him. Excitedly he pointed to the window. "Remember, I forced this window?" he said tensely. "Well, there's no sign of my forcing it now!"

"I think that's enough for to-night," Lawrence said thickly. "Let's get out of here before we go crackers!"

ONE by one the four men dropped out of the window to the garden path. The clouds had completely dispersed and a full moon bathed the countryside in a pale light.

Parker gave a strangled grunt, whispered in agitated tones: "Full moon on the last quarter!"

The significance of his remark struck home. The three listeners shivered with intangible fear—for they had entered Mills Inc. Wolverhampton Car Depot on a dark, wet night in the moon's last quarter.

It was then they realised that the grounds had undergone a subtle change.

The factory was unchanged. Window for

window, brick for brick, identical with the building they had entered by forcing a way. But these grounds! Shrubbery where no shrubbery had previously existed! Trees, some recognisable as sycamores and oaks, some that defied all classification! And in the distance a range of low hills where once was flat plainland!

Lawrence bent down and felt the soil. Moist, certainly, but by no means moist enough considering the amount of rainfall at the time of their burglarious entry. Where on earth were they? Not another world, surely? No, not another world. The old, familiar crinkled face of the Moon proved that. What, then, had happened during their forty minutes' visit to Mills Inc. Wolverhampton Depot? For something had happened—something terrifyingly strange and unworldly had occurred which no sane mind could grasp.

"Have you any idea what has happened, Chief?" Wilson asked. "D'you think that damned chamber had anything to do with it?"

"Can't say off-hand," Lawrence replied after a pause. He was as sorely puzzled as his companions.

They struck a road after some twenty minutes' walk across the open countryside; a well made metal road of curious composition. It was a pale blue tint and the surface, though smooth, seemed to possess a tenacious grip. Yet, despite the rock hard material they felt as if they were wading through treacle. It was practically impossible to slip or slide on the smooth surface of the road. Lining the roadside were short, stout metal poles, some three feet tall and two inches in diameter, each topped off with a little red light less than one inch across. They gave no illumination so dim was their coloured light. Like the road, these silent sentinels, 100 yards apart, added to the unreality of the surroundings. Lawrence gave a glance to the north-east, but the customary glow of Wolverhampton's lights in the sky was missing.

"I've an idea we had better leave the road and go cross country," Lawrence suddenly observed. "Roads mean people. Sooner or later we're bound to bump into some early riser and I think it would be an elementary precaution to remain unobserved till we get the lay of the land."

They leapt across a bordering ditch and trudged across the rough turf in silence. Their leader's wise words had affected his listeners. It brought home to them how utterly alien this countryside was, despite it being England. The nightmare effect was beginning to gnaw at even the totally unimaginative mind of that most silent of men—Parker. He now began muttering to himself each time he tripped over the rough stubble.

Only once in their long march did they pass a building. It was a huge, brick-built affair about one hundred feet high and at least a quarter of a mile square. What its purpose was none could fathom. It possessed neither windows nor doors. A vast cube of brickwork. Then, as they got closer, they saw they had made a mistake. There was a single pair of sliding doors, painted to tone with the surrounding brickwork. Bearing that familiar mark—a windmill and a watermill! From the single door a blue tinted road swept in a graceful curve over the moor and disappeared in the distance.

They skirted the building. A short distance away was a small wood of larch and beech which offered protection during the daylight hours, obviously not far off now. Tired, hungry and dispirited, the four adventurers crept into hiding.

"We had better take stock," Lawrence suggested as he squatted against the bole of an ancient tree. "We're marooned by some strange power. Climate and flora tells me we are still in England. Of that I'm pretty certain. Also I'm positive that the factory we entered is the actual double of that building we have left way back, but how we changed out of one building into the other I can't even guess—wouldn't try to guess"

He paused in momentary contemplation, then continued: "We'll follow the custom of shipwrecked mariners. Turn out your pockets and we'll assess our resources—if any!"

A little pile of belongings showed vaguely in the dim moonlight. Lawrence flicked his torch on and began to enumerate the slender stock of personal belongings.

"Four torches, all good batteries. We'll use one torch at a time to save those batteries. Four revolvers—thirty bullets. No spare cartridges. Not much good if the natives prove hostile. Still, better than nothing. Headlam's tool kit; very valuable now, so he must be careful not to lose it. Cigarette cases—thank the Lord they're well stocked—lighters, keys and cash, assortment of pocket knives, one pocket mirror and that's the lot."

"Not so bad, Chief," Wilson observed. "We can go quite a way with that lot."

"I wouldn't be saying that," Headlam remarked ruefully. "I'll soon be ready to swap my precious tool kit for a hamburger!"

"Therein lays our weakness. We won't go far without food and drink." Lawrence rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "We've covered a few miles tonight and one thing has struck me. The villages and farms, villas and cottages, which abound in this district have all vanished. No sign of cattle or crops. Food's going to be a damn serious problem."

"Berries and wild fruit?" Parker suggested.

"We won't grow fat on that, will we?" Headlam laughed doubtfully. "I vote we take a chance and push on. We must get somewhere eventually if we keep going."

Lawrence stood up and the others pocketed their belongings. Dawn was tingeing the sky as they left the shelter of the wood. In the middle distance the huge bulk of the Mills Inc. building loomed gaunt, desolate and forbidding.

III.

STRIKING across the rough turf, Lawrence headed due south. In the grey light of the dawn he saw a range of hills, which should afford a good vantage point to spy out the countryside.

It took them over an hour to reach the hills and another twenty minutes to scale the highest one. The sun was well up, illuminating the early morning brilliantly. The air was crystal clear.

But only disappointment awaited them. As far as eye could see was wild, uninhabited countryside. Three roads. No houses. No vehicles. Not even a stray dog.

"But where is everybody?" Headlam asked, looking about blankly. "Why, Chief, this was one of the most popular residential districts in the Midlands for the well-to-do."

Lawrence shrugged. His spirits were getting low. Far away, on the distant horizon, the huge Mills Inc. Wolverhampton Depot (or its double) stood lonely and forlorn. Yet that vast building must afford employment for thousands of hands. And nearer that squat, windowless block must equally contain employees in untold numbers. But where was everybody housed?

"What's that?" Parker exclaimed, shielding his eyes from the morning sun. He stared eastwards and on a distant road they caught a momentary sparkle of light. It vanished and reappeared in a different position. Lawrence whistled softly.

"Must be a car of some sort," he replied, "and from its change of position in a few seconds it must be shifting at a colossal speed. Well over three hundred miles an hour!"

"But, Chief, it wouldn't hold the road at that . . ." Wilson paused, then added slowly: "Of course, *the road holds the car*—that queer, gluey surface must be a form of magnetic attraction!"

They could see the road they had abandoned during the night. Far away it intersected the other road on which the invisible vehicle sped. Again a sparkle of reflected sunshine and the car tore towards them. It apparently did not slacken speed at the right-angled intersection!

The car accelerated as it neared the hills, then smoothly soared into the air, leaving the road with the easy grace of a bird. As silently as a glider it circled round then settled down on a hill with a flattened peak. The four men stared at the machine with such intense interest that they forgot all need for caution, not even attempting to hide from the newcomers.

The machine was enamelled black and relieved with horizontal bands of silver. It was streamlined to conventional tear-drop pattern and possessed three wheels—two in front and a single tail wheel for the steering. Having neither wings nor airscrew, it was difficult to realise that it could fly with facility, and their examination at a distance did not afford the watching men any clue as to how this most remarkable machine could become airborne.

A door opened and three people tumbled out, laughing shrilly and pulling after them a small case or basket. From their build they seemed very small and slight, none exceeding a stature of five feet. Their clothes were simple to an extreme. A knee-length, sleeveless smock with a low cut, square neck, gaily bordered with coloured silk and a single embroidered device in gold thread on the breast. Pierced leather shoes, bare legs. No hats. Each wore a belt round the waist, from which depended a small, flat bag or pouch. Even from a distance the three diminutive people were plainly swarthy and un-English in appearance, having jet black, lank hair and skins as brown as that of an inhabitant of the tropical South Seas.

Suddenly the three little strangers stiffened as they spied Lawrence and his companions. They raised their hands and covered their eyes, bowing low as they did so. Then, having performed this somewhat ceremonial salutation to the four Secret Service men, they quietly picked up the small box and retreated out of sight to the further side of the car-plane.

"Well, this is a rum go!" Wilson exploded loudly, throwing all need for caution to the winds in his astonishment. "Say, which of us is potty? Who do they think we are?"

"Our presence certainly surprised them; they didn't expect to see us," Lawrence replied slowly. "Yet, at the same time, they seemed to accept us as a normal, chance met quartette. Our difference of colouring, build and attire did not surprise them so much as our actually being here, or I'm a Dutchman."

"Shall we chance it and contact them?" Headlam queried.

"We're four to three, and armed," Wilson interjected.

"We've been seen so there's really nothing to lose," Lawrence admitted. "Come on, then. We might find out where everybody lives these days."

They descended their hill and climbed up the other, lesser hill, with the flat top. The sound of their approach preceded them, for they found the three little strangers were on their feet, waiting them with apparent apprehension. The box was open and proved to be nothing more than an elaborately fitted picnic hamper.

Once again three pairs of hands covered three pairs of eyes. Once again the low bow. This time, however, they remained in the bowed position.

"Cherog Ha," said the centre of the three bowed figures.

"Cherog Ki," this from his companion who stood to the left hand.

"Cherog Usti," murmured the third.

"I wonder if they speak English," Headlam

whispered to Lawrence. The centre one must have possessed preternaturally keen hearing, for the fellow answered: "But, surely, O Lord of the Moon; ever since your Lunar Graciousness in your blinding wisdom made the Edict that all should learn the language of the High and Mighty Selenites, we have attended the schools. Yes, even my brother, Cherog Ki, and my sister, Cherog Usti, speak the Engle-ish of the glorious Lunar Lords!"

"HOW old are you, Cherog Ha?" Lawrence asked and added: "Straighten up and uncover your eyes. We won't eat you." He smiled at the three little people, wishing to encourage them, gain their confidence.

"It is not permitted that one less than a Suvarg shall gaze on your Lordship's blinding beauty," Cherog Ha replied. "I am 24 and my brother is 19, Lord."

Lawrence did not answer, but instead gently removed the girl's hand from her eyes and tilted her chin.

"Tell me, Cherog Usti. Look well and answer me. Is my beauty blinding you?"

She gazed in fascinated awe at Lawrence, who smiled encouragingly at her. There was a strange, outlandish beauty in her swarthy colouring—a wild gipsy. Even her long hair, which was proverbially "straight as a yard of pump water," possessed a sheen and softness that would have made her the envy of Hollywood. Her brows were thick and she had deep brown eyes that gazed intently at Lawrence, the lips, sensuously full, were parted slightly, revealing sharp little white teeth. Her boyish figure, containing not a single seductive curve, offset the voluptuousness of her features.

"Nay, Lord. You are handsome, but not blindingly beautiful——" This brought low gasps of pious horror from her brothers. Her eyes swept over Lawrence's companions. "And that one," she said, indicating Parker, "is very ugly!"

"Lord! Lord! She is a child; she is only 16!" Cherog Ha cried in agitation, and so far forgot himself as to uncover his eyes.

"But she tells the truth," Lawrence smiled.

"Huh, izzatso!" Parker grunted and scowled at the girl.

"Oh, but it is a nice kind of ugliness, Lord," Cherog Usti added placatingly with such good effect that Parker's scowl resolved itself into laughter.

"Sit down and get on with your breakfasts and don't be so shy," Lawrence directed the little people, and sat himself on the coarse turf. "What do you do, Cherog Ha?"

"I am a vardi in Unit 17 of the Mills of the Gods," he answered. "I have charge of number three forging shop," he added proudly.

"And you, Cherog Ki?"

"I am but a horg in the assembly shop for power units, also at Unit 17," Cherog Ki replied, and by force of habit kept his eyes averted from Lawrence's "blinding beauty."

"And your sister?"

"She keeps house for us," Cherog Ha answered. "Our parents have gone to the Halls of Selene."

The phrase came so naturally that its implication came instantly to Lawrence. "Gone to the Halls of Selene." What a graceful way of saying, "Mum and Dad are dead!"

They were so small and so naive that it was quite easy to imagine them to be but children. What a delightful world this must be with its soft spoken people.

"Know your history?" Lawrence pursued. "When did the Lords of the Moon first dwell amongst you?"

"At the time of my birth."

"What becomes of all the things you make in the great Units?" was the next question.

"Some we keep for ourselves. The rest go to the Moon for the Lords Resident."

Yes. This was the source of Mills Inc. fabulous output. Lawrence digested the information slowly as its implications became more and more apparent. What was the first pointer to Mills Inc. strange products? Something to do with jam, wasn't it? A fellow named Howard Springer, so Colonel Freeman had told him, a big time jam manufacturer, had first called the Government's attention to the machinations of Mills Inc.

"Ever heard of Luvella?" Lawrence queried.

"Why, Lord, everyone knows of Luvella. It is the great continent south and east of Preemi."

"Can you draw it?" Lawrence asked, proffering paper and pencil. Cherog Ha rapidly sketched a creditable map of Africa! That clinched things. This was—must be—a shadowy duplicate of Earth! Luvella—Africa—Luvella—Luvella Syrup! No wonder Springer's analytical chemist couldn't identify the sugar cane employed in its manufacture. And Kwalade, with its equally mysterious fruit—neither hybrid nor synthetic, yet unrecognisable as a natural citrus fruit.

Free labour, free materials, world wide natural resources all for the taking. £75 cars! A thousand and one inventions. The Mills of the Gods. The Mills. Mills Incorporated!

The great secret was out!

IV

THERE was a slight rustle in the undergrowth behind them. On turning Lawrence saw a stranger, a stocky, fair-haired man of fifty or thereabouts, approaching them. He was clad in a conventional lounge suit and wore a new, though battered, felt hat tipped back on his head. From the left lapel of his jacket a silver badge caught and reflected the sun with dancing spears of light. As he came closer they saw the device was a rayed orb with a script

letter " M " engraved boldly on the raised portion of the orb. The three natives fell silent and a look of uneasiness crept over their features. The stranger strode up purposefully, gave a piercing glance at Lawrence and his companions, leisurely produced a cigarette, lit it and inhaled deeply.

" Huh! Got your passes?" he growled in coarse, uncultured tones. He snatched at the slip of paper Cherog Ha had produced from his waist pouch. Having scanned it he looked at the young man suspiciously. " You know you're not allowed to come near a Moon Hall." He jerked his head towards the distant square, windowless building. " Picked a spot pretty dam' close to that, didn't you, you nosey little swines!"

" The hills are not out of bounds, Lord," Cherog Ha replied humbly, with head bowed.

" I don't want any of your back chat, vardi!" the fellow snarled. " These Lords will verify that you broke the law and argued with an enforcement officer. Like to be disrated to sub-horg, swine?"

It was quite evident that Cherog did not entertain the idea of being set down from a foreman to under labourer with enthusiasm. He turned appealingly to Lawrence. " Their Lunar Graciousness will not suffer what would be an injustice. They saw us arrive and can testify that we did not go near the Moon Hall."

" That is so," Lawrence affirmed with a nod of the head. " And I don't think——"

" Say, you're new to Preemi, aren't you? When did you arrive? Let's see your identity clips!"

He thrust out his hand and Lawrence gave a shrug of helplessness. With commendable promptness, Wilson jabbed his revolver in the bully's kidneys.

" Spies, huh!" he exclaimed thickly. " Don't know how far you think you'll get, but it won't be far, you can take it from me!" He suddenly raised his hand and began to shout: " Thirty-two calling; thirty-two calling——"

Cherog Ha leapt forward and dashed his fist in the man's face. The fellow stumbled back against Wilson, who promptly reversed his gun and dealt him a blow across the head. Without even a groan the man slumped on the turf, unconscious.

Lawrence plucked the silver insignia from the stranger's lapel and slipped it into his own buttonhole. He also removed what he had at first taken for a gold wrist watch, but which proved to be a minute radio communicator, into which the enforcement officer had been calling his number.

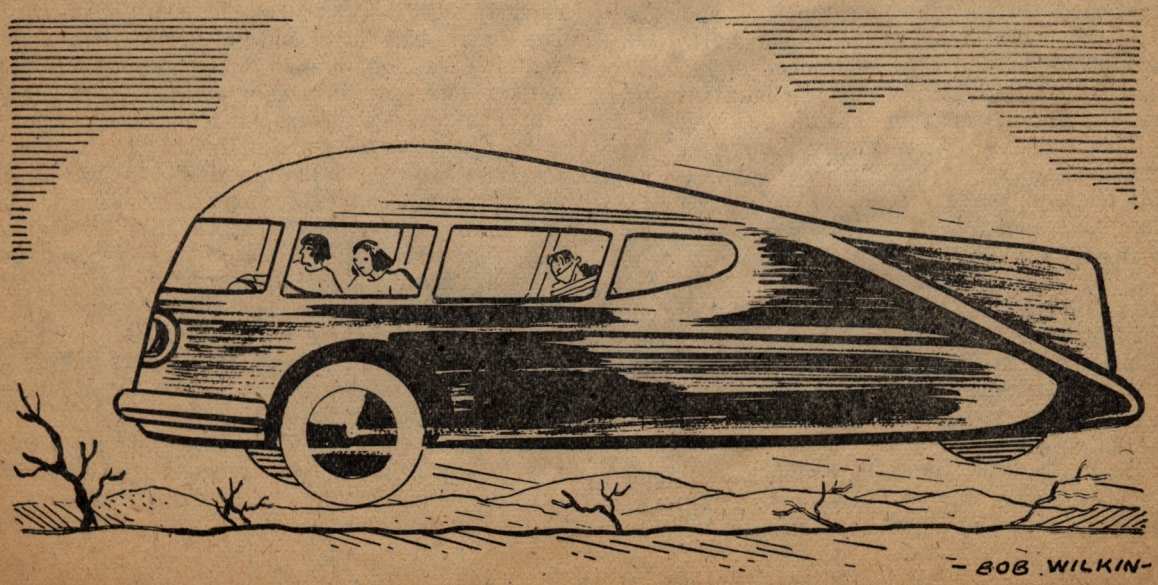
" We must go from here at once, Lords. It will not be wise to linger."

" Your car can't take all," Parker grunted with his usual economy of words.

" We shall make two trips, then, your Lunar Grace," Cherog Ha replied. " It would be wise if we took this enforcement officer with us first, whilst your Noble Lordships take cover in yonder copse till we return. We shall not be very long. You will come with us, Noble One?" This last was addressed to Lawrence, who nodded agreement.

He stooped and efficiently bound and gagged the enforcement officer with his own tie and handkerchief. The strap from the picnic basket secured the fellow's legs.

The instrument panel was set out on much the same lines as a normal car. A variety of dials and buttons, ignition and lighting switches. Studying Cherog's movements closely, Lawrence memorised the controls and method of operation for future reference. A faintly audible hum came from the rear-mounted engine. An even fainter trembling as the car rolled forwards a few yards then became airborne; a smooth, gentle circling as it mounted steadily, then a swift rush in a parallel direction of the broader of the two intersecting roads. Despite the streamlining, the air drummed against the coachwork as they hurtled through the atmosphere at ever-mounting speed. Soon they were past the



intersection and at a steady 500 miles an hour struck due south. Twenty minutes later the aerocar slowed to less than half speed, dropped to the road surface and hummed along the smooth highway at what seemed still a colossal and breakneck velocity, though the slim, dark little driver seemed utterly unconcerned about the apparent risk they must be taking. It was later that Lawrence learnt these people considered less than 300 miles per hour dawdling!

THE road dipped and they entered a brilliantly lit tunnel. Other tunnels branched off and Cherog Ha brought his speed down to less than 40 m.p.h. They now encountered occasional traffic, chiefly in the form of giant sixteen-wheeled lorries and massive passenger vehicles. The tunnels became more complex in layout. Great halls a thousand yards wide with as many as twenty tunnels radiating from them; traffic in ever-increasing numbers and now pedestrians. An underground city! The lighting was brilliant, beautiful and varied; there was a continuous hum of traffic and the light-hearted chatter of a multitude of apparently happy and prosperous people.

They reached a section of the busy city and plunged down a small, less frequented tunnel, then turned into yet another, quite deserted tunnel. Set at regular intervals were doors of dwellings which were evidently hewn into the living rock itself. They stopped before one of these and Cherog Ha murmured softly a short phrase into the mouthpiece of a sound-controlled lock. The door swung open. Cherog Ki and Lawrence bundled their captive into the house and Cherog Usti followed them swiftly. She opened the door of a plainly furnished room and they deposited their victim in it and locked the door.

Lawrence and Cherog Ha returned to their vehicle, sped through the maze of tubular ways and finally burst into the sunshine once more. The air thrummed past as they left the road and soared skywards. The range of Midland hills loomed swiftly into sight and the flat-topped peak could be distinguished with ease. Cherog Ha landed smoothly and the aerocar rolled to a halt.

They waited a few moments, expecting their companions to emerge from their place of concealment and join them. Then, as nothing of the sort happened, they eyed each other uneasily. Lawrence got out of the aerocar.

"I'm going to take a look around. If anyone comes or anything happens, clear off; never mind about me. If I don't rejoin you within an hour, go home, turn that so-called enforcement officer loose in the most remote countryside you know of, and forget everything that has ever happened," were his parting instructions.

He plunged into the distant coppice and made a thorough search, but there was no sign of his associates. He emerged on the far side. Nothing. Bare, blank countryside. A shadow flashed by him. He looked up. Cherog Ha, piloting the aerocar, pointed frantically behind as he mouthed soundless words. At a greater altitude was a large aerocar, enamelled dead white and bearing on each of its sides a gleaming silver orb!

Cherog Ha darted off at terrific speed. The patrol car hovered over Lawrence, then a loudspeaker blared out in pure Americanese:

"Stay put, mutt! We gottya covered. Ya under arrest!"

LAWRENCE did not hesitate to test the challenge. He spun on his heels and raced back to the cover of the dense copse. He took half-a-dozen paces then fell flat on his face. He lay motionless, unable to even blink an eyelid. Every voluntary muscle in his body was paralysed, and not even to save his life could he so much as move his little finger a fraction of an inch; nor did the exercise of every atom of will power have the slightest effect. Once, for a brief moment, the paralysis lifted and he managed to stagger to his knees, then, as the white aerocar completed its landing manœuvre the force beam struck him again, so that he rolled over on his side and became rigidly immobile.

Four men came from the machine, clad in black uniforms of semi-military cut, each with a silver orb emblazoned on the left breast and the now familiar badge on their peaked caps. They stood round him. Surveyed him in scowling silence. The sweepings of American jails. Only one held a weapon in his hand—a curious bell-mouthed affair not unlike a miniature blunderbuss. A faint violet luminosity could be seen hovering and flickering around its gaping muzzle and Lawrence concluded correctly that this instrument was the cause of his helplessness.

The violet glow snapped off and strength flowed back to his body, but before he could make the slightest move he was pounced upon and pinioned. His captors half thrust and half carried him to the aerocar. He found himself dumped on the rear seat with a menacing plug-ugly on each side. The other uniformed gangsters, for that was the obvious trade mark stamped on each brutal face, occupied the front seat. The aerocar lifted and tore off at enormous speed in the direction taken by Cherog Ha. In ten minutes they had overtaken the fleeing black and silver aerocar. The pilot of the white machine pressed a button on his instrument panel; a slight shock and hiss came from the fore part underneath the purring white monster. Cherog Ha's vehicle exploded into a thousand fragments in mid-air! The white aerocar rocked in the blast of the explosion then turned and headed due north.

The patrol car, for such it was, came down with a light touch on a narrow concrete runway which dipped into the ground. The unostentatious entry to the Headquarters of these killers was such that,

though it was in full view of the world, its apparent unimportance as an entry defied anyone's curiosity. At a depth of four hundred feet they came to a massive steel door, which barred the way. Over the door a scanning disc dispassionately surveyed the machine and its occupants and, satisfied that all was well, permitted the huge door to swing open silently on its gimbals. Just inside was a small office and guardhouse with transmitting and receiving televisors and several mechanisms that Lawrence could not identify. Ahead, the tunnel broadened out, brilliantly illuminated and tiled in fantastic designs. There was little traffic other than uniformed officials nipping about on electric scooters.

The aerocar drew to a halt. Lawrence was hustled out, urged through a doorway into an office. A stout, bald-headed man sitting behind an ornate desk looked up. His tiny, piggish eyes fastened themselves on the prisoner. They travelled from his face to the enforcement officer's badge Lawrence was still wearing..

"So you got him, eh? Have much trouble, Schumacher?" he barked.

"No, sir. We kept tune on No. 32's badge quite easily," the ruffian who seemed to be the aerocar crew's squad leader as well as pilot answered. "Beg to report, sir, that we were forced to destroy the private aerocar and this man's confederate in order to keep his capture secret."

Bald Head frowned. He looked rather doubtful at the pilot's report and a trace of uneasiness flicked in and out of his tiny, cunning eyes. "I don't like that, Schumacher. You know the Council's attitude to killing. Still, it's no use crying over spilt milk. Let me have your full report soon. Now, you, what's your name?"

The last was barked at Lawrence, who smiled to hide his disquiet.

"Smith. William Smith," he replied glibly.

"Mr. William Smith. Very rare name!" Bald Head said with a sneer as he wrote on a form. "And you come from—Mr. William Smith?"

"No fixed abode."

Bald Head put down his pen with a sigh. Resting his elbows on the desk and pressing the tips of his fingers together, he maintained a lengthy silence. Then he spoke swiftly and harshly.

"My dear Mr. William Smith, of no fixed abode. This won't do; won't do at all! You see, you're in a world where *everyone* has a fixed abode; a fixed position in the social order. This is a world without hoboes. We have no tramps, itinerant labourers and the like. Every man has his job and stays put! You wear the badge of Operative Thirty-two of the Law Enforcement Patrol. Most obviously you are neither Mr. William Smith nor Number Thirty-two, whose name, by the way, is Vegger. You, Mr. Smith, are apparently unaware that Vegger sent out a frantic call for help just before he was attacked. What have you done with our Operative? Killed him?"

Lawrence did not reply. Bald Head nodded.

"Obstinate, eh? Empty his pockets, Schumacher."

The pilot obeyed, but it was Lawrence's custom, as it was with all members of the Intelligence Service, never to carry a thing on him which would connect him in any way with that mysterious and elusive force known as M.I.5. Bald Head gave a shrug after examining the articles. "Nothing here of value except this letter which suggests you entered Preemi via the Wolverhampton Depot. Did you come alone? No answer? How did you contact the natives and what story did you spin them to enlist their help? Still no answer? What do you actually know or have discovered of Mills Incorporated?"

He once again pulled the official form to him and scrawled on it: "False name and no address. No replies to all questions. Detained Cell 72, Block 9."

He pressed a bell push. An armed man entered the room and thrust a paralyser gun in Lawrence's ribs.

"Seventy-two, block nine," Bald Head snapped. "Au 'voir, Mr. William Smith. I hope your memory will improve when you meet the Council!"

V.

PARKER, Headlam and Wilson waited till the rapidly receding aerocar had vanished from sight. Now that their leader had gone with the natives and the captured enforcement officer the seniority resolved itself on Parker's shoulders. He turned, sparing of words as usual: "Take cover; the coppice."

They had been hidden in the undergrowth a bare fifteen minutes when, hurtling like a thunderbolt out of the sky, came a dead white aerocar, its sides emblazoned with the now instantly recognised orb in silver. It banked sharply over the copse and, in a graceful volplane settled smoothly on the rough turf. Four men in black uniforms got out and looked around them. One began shouting, "Vegger! Vegger! Where are you?"

"He can't be around," another of the newcomers remarked. "We had clear vision aloft and would have seen him plainly if he'd been anywhere in the locality."

"Unless the bum's hiding in the brushwood over there," a third man remarked.

"He'd have seen us land and come out, you dumb cluck," the fellow who had shouted replied. "I'll get on to Headquarters. Meanwhile, you guys scout around."

Parker and his companions drew their revolvers and waited tensely for discovery and alarm. The searchers, armed with curious bell-mouth pistols, began their advance on the Secret Service men's hiding place. The leader walked back to the white aerocar and flipped a switch. He made a report then called his associates back to the machine.

"Stop searching around," he said, his voice powerful and resonant, carrying clearly to the concealed listeners. "We've got to tune in to Vegger's badge. The Chief says it's three four nine two on the record. Nordsen, you take the beam control; Ryan can operate. Give me the earphones."

Nordsen got into the aerocar and passed out the earphones to his squad leader. He clamped them on. The man Ryan busied himself at the controls of a large black cabinet which was built into the back of the coachwork. Nordsen meanwhile held a small watch-like mechanism in his hand and gazed intently into the dial. He waved his arm gently to right and left and at the same time continuously tilted the little instrument so that it pointed skywards then down to the ground. As he carried out this complicated movement he very slowly began to turn on his heels until he had completed over half a circle. Suddenly he gave a warning cry and stiffened. "Intensity fifty-four!" he called out. "South south west by south!" Ryan twiddled the knobs rapidly.

"Hear anything, Schumacher?"

The man with the earphones shook his head. "Interference—try the ground in that direction, Nordsen." The dial was slowly tilted from horizon to the ground. "Stop!" Schumacher cried. "Readings!"

"Intensity sixty-one. Declination twelve. Bearings as before."

The squad leader looked at Ryan. The man at the controls began to call out: "Main shaft of Sathiro. Moving steadily. Centre of city now. Turned off left. Turned right. Half mile—stopped. Reading—block three nineteen—dwelling—damn! They're moving again before I could get the dwelling number."

The squad leader raised a hand. Then he said excitedly: "The note is getting louder. Vegger's returning. What's his game, I wonder?" For nearly two minutes he listened then turned to Nordsen. "Readings?"

Nordsen chanted out: "Intensity eighty-eight, rising—declination now to ascension—ascension twenty-one—bearings still south south west by south."

"He's coming straight back!" Schumacher cried and tore off his earphones. "Quick, all aboard. Get up to ten thousand and we'll watch. See what sort of funny game Vegger's up to."

In less than a minute the aerocar was out of sight, the non-reflecting white surface invisible against the glare of the afternoon sun.

Parker turned to his companions. "Pretty plain," he said. "The boss wearing that feller's badge. Must be some form of radio-location, like a magnetic prospector. Every badge a different frequency. They traced Lawrence's movements and think it's Vegger—their man. Now's our chance to beat it to better cover in denser wood in the valley. We can't do a thing; bide our time. Act later. Come on."

"What about warning Lawrence of the trap, though?" Headlam queried.

"No chance. Bus up there would get the lot of us. Separated we stand a better chance of helping each other. Together we're all scooped up!"

The others had to agree with the wisdom of their temporary leader in that respect. If Lawrence was captured they were still loose to aid him. The Secret Service operatives scattered and made their way down the side of the flat topped hill. The little depression between the two hills was sparsely wooded and, to aid concealment, they each selected a tree and scaled it. Safe away in the thick-leaved boughs they awaited developments on the hill. Nor did they have long to wait. They witnessed the return of Cherog Ha's aerocar and the lightning swoop of the white patrol machine. Lawrence's capture. The distant thump of an explosion when the patrol made its murderous attack on Cherog Ha and blew his machine to fragments.

"Well, here's a nice kettle of fish!" Wilson exclaimed. "They've got the Chief—what do we do now?"

Parker considered for a moment. He snapped his fingers. "Only one solution. We'll have to locate this city of Sathiro. It's an underground place according to those fellers. We want block three hundred and nineteen. Somewhere around there Cherog's brother and sister live. We must contact them. They'll help us. It's our only chance. Come!"

THE hours dragged by in slow procession. In the cell time seemed to stand still. According to his watch, Lawrence had been held a prisoner two hours and by now he was ravenously hungry, for he had not eaten for over thirty hours. At long last his cell door opened and two uniformed men entered, one bearing a tray well laden, which was dumped down with a clatter on the table. No word was spoken by either jailer or captive. The door closed and the moment he was alone Lawrence drew the table nearer his bunk and examined his meal. It was ample and very tastily prepared; not prison fare at all, but probably a meal specially served for unfortunates detained for investigation or trial. The cut from the joint had the flavour of chicken and the texture of beef, suggesting a domestic animal of local origin and quite unidentifiable. To contrast this was a bottle of beer, which gave Lawrence a momentary twinge of nostalgia. Replete, he lit a cigarette and lay on his bunk. A couple of minutes passed, the cigarette drooped, fell to the floor unheeded. A deep, steady breathing faintly quivered the air of the small cell—he slept and did not waken when some time later the jailer and two technicians entered the room. The jailer departed with the tray, leaving the two white coated men in charge. They had brought with them a large, polished wooden case, which they stood on the table. One

man took a trailing length of flex and plugged in on the lighting circuit. Then he placed a pair of earphones on and began twiddling some of the many knobs set in the ebonite top inside the case. His companion had, meanwhile, propped up the sleeping man and fastened a copper band round his head. A set of six discs on the inside of the band pressed directly on Lawrence's scalp, and each disc was connected to a trailing filament of wire, which, in turn, were gathered together in a single flex and plugged into a small connector at the side of the shining wood case.

"Ready for reception," the man at the controls murmured.

His companion nodded, sat beside Lawrence and began to whisper unfinished questions in the drugged man's ear. He paused between each incomplete query and Lawrence, gripped by the strange, unearthly drug, mentally completed each question with the correct answer!

"Your name is——?"

"George Lawrence."

"You live at——?"

"Flat sixteen, Half Moon Street, London."

"Your employers are——?"

"His Majesty's Government—Department M.I.5, Whitehall."

"You entered this world via——?"

"The Wolverhampton Depot of Mills Incorporated."

The questioning went on and on. The soft, persuasive tones; the mental replies.

When Lawrence awoke some hours later without any ill-effects from his drugging and having no recollection of his cross-examination, he was surprised to find a man—a total stranger—waiting for him with admirable patience. He was a tiny little chap, about fifty, dapper, very smiling, and oh, so very friendly.

"Had a good sleep? Feel better now? Think you'd like to answer a few questions now, hey?" he trilled in a squeaky voice and at the same time caressed his rather prominent nose.

"Fire ahead, but I don't promise to answer your questions. Who are you, anyway?"

"Just an interrogation officer—nobody of much importance." The little imp said this with a broad wink, which left Lawrence in no doubt that the fellow's conceit was in inverse proportion to his stature.

"Now, Mr. Lawrence, tell me in your own words, what is the British Government's attitude towards the increasingly difficult economical situation. Do you think there will be a crisis soon; the Government resign?"

Lawrence countered this with another question. "Why ask me? I'm not in the Government. And say, how did you get hold of my name?"

The little man pulled a slim notebook from his pocket and thumbed the pages. He cleared his throat and began to read aloud: "George Lawrence, Secret Service Agent. Commissioned to investigate Mills Incorporated by Colonel Freeman. 'Accompanied by three assistants, namely, Headlam, Wilson and Parker." Lawrence looked startled at this bit of knowledge, but far worse was to follow. "You did burglariously enter our depot at Wolverhampton. You passed through the Forbidden Chamber and entered this world. You contacted natives—two brothers and a sister named Cherog. You undermined their allegiance and attacked Enforcement Officer Vegger. You made him prisoner and held him in the Cherogs' apartments. Your friends have been captured and the Cherogs are soon to be executed for high treason!"

He closed his notebook with a snap and added: "Cherog Ha has paid the penalty already. He was killed while trying to escape—but there, you were present when it happened. Now, let us be sensible. I want to discuss Earth conditions with you. You're in close touch with the influential people. What is their opinion? Will there be war or a world-wide revolution? Or just economic collapse and chaos—you know, anarchy?"

"Since you're so damn clever and have found out so much about me and my business, why didn't you go the whole hog and find out all you wanted to know at the time? How did you manage it, anyway—hypnotism?"

"Oh, no, nothing so crude, my dear fellow. Psycho-interrogation accomplished by radiodetector of thought and drugging the conscious to prevent interference of sub-conscious projection of mental images. Quite simple when you know how, isn't it, my dear Lawrence?"

"But what is the point? What are Mills Incorporated? Who is behind it? Where do they get their capital from? Why this economic sabotage of civilisation? What is this world and where is it in the Universe?"

"I said before, I'm a very unimportant individual in the scheme of things—just an interrogation officer" —again the prodigious wink—"and as such I cannot answer your questions. And you won't answer mine? Too bad! The High Council will be very cross. I shouldn't try and tempt them to lose their temper. The Lunar Lords are really very terrible when aroused. No, please, don't think I'm trying to fool you. Oh, dear, it makes me feel quite faint when I think of some of the tortures they inflict! Really, my dear Lawrence, don't antagonise them, whatever you do. It's too, too terribly dangerous!"

"Phooey!" Lawrence replied lightly to conceal his misgivings. But he could not forget the ruthless wiping out of Cherog Ha and his aerocar. Nor the depraved, brutal faces of the patrolmen.

"It is all very well to say 'phooey,' but, believe me, I am not for one instant trying to frighten you," the little man impressed.

VI.

THE three Earthmen emerged from their hiding place and began trudging along in moody silence.

They had plodded at least five miles when they came across the shattered and scattered remnants of Cherog Ha's aerocar. But of the native there was no sign. Whether he had been blown to smithereens or had been taken prisoner they had no means of knowing. But the discovery of the wreckage damped their spirits even more than they had thought possible. By now it seemed to them that even the locating of Sathiro was an event of no importance. They dare not reveal themselves, nor could they make enquiries regarding Cherog Ha's address, or the place where Lawrence might be detained.

" Is there any use in our going to Sathiro, wherever it may be?" Wilson queried as they recommenced their trek southwards. " Even if we do find it, what the hell are we going to do? And, Parker, we can't go on much longer without food."

" Chew grass!" Parker growled rudely. " Quit bellyaching, Wilson. Maybe we can't do a thing, but we're not going back without the boss!"

Headlam clutched Parker's arm suddenly. " Look! Isn't that someone ahead of us? See, dodging in in and out of those gorse bushes."

The Earthmen advanced stealthily on the squat form of the native. Suddenly the man sensed their presence, for he turned, stared in their direction, gave a shout and ran—towards them! It was Cherog Ha!

His explanation was simple. He knew that the patrol car would give chase as soon as Lawrence had been captured. And that it was useless to hope to outdistance such a machine with an ordinary aerocar. " So, as soon as I was out of sight, I landed and set the autopilot in action and hid away. Sure enough, soon afterwards the patrol car passed me and shot my aerocar down," Cherog Ha explained, then added: " I don't think they noticed it was empty when they blew it out of the sky."

" How far is it to Sathiro?" Parker asked the native.

" Just over a hundred miles from here. About three days' march!"

Wilson gave a faint groan. " Suffering Moses! On an empty stomach—we'll never do it. We've not eaten for over thirty hours."

" We'll get there this evening," Cherog Ha said with a smile. " That is if your Lunar Lordship can walk another twelve miles."

" He'll walk!" Parker scowled so ferociously at the unfortunate Wilson that Headlam burst out laughing. After three hours they hit a highway whose borders were lined with the usual posts some three feet high and spaced a hundred yards apart. Each post had the tiny red light at its tip shining dully across the road at its counterpart.

" We'll wait here," Cherog Ha directed. The quartette waited patiently for some ten minutes, though the three Earthmen had no idea what it was they were waiting for. Then, in the distance, there came a heavy drone. Sunlight flashed and glittered on glass and plated metal. A huge sixteen-wheeled heavy transport lorry came thundering along at a steady hundred miles an hour. Cherog Ha covered the little red light on the post with the palm of his hand.

As the giant vehicle came abreast of the obscured light there came a loud hiss of compressed air and the squealing of powerful brakes. The laden machine came to a halt some sixty yards past the post.

" All aboard," Cherog Ha cried as he led the way to the driving cabin. To the Earthmen's surprise the cabin was driverless and consisted of an upholstered bench six feet long (or better described as occupying the width of the cabin), and an instrument board, with a speedometer, a destination instrument which piloted the huge machine from city to city and a single tumbler switch labelled " Start-Stop." No steering wheel, clutch, accelerator or footbrake as found in a normal car, nor gearlever or handbrake. Wilson was last in and sank on the bench with a sigh of satisfaction. Cherog Ha flipped the switch to " Start " and the huge lorry crawled along at half-walking pace. They drew abreast of the next roadside post with its tiny red light. A click of relays, a surge of mighty power unleashed and the thirty tons of steel and plastics hurtled forward. The roar of the driving motors rose to the drone of a colossal insect in flight. Now and again they saw similar lorries shoot past them in the opposite direction, driverless, but less liable to accident than any machine controlled by human beings.

HEADLAM, the mechanic of the party, soon figured out for himself that these mighty transports were fed by radio power and the roadside posts were photo-electric controls. Electric relays with interrupted circuits stopped and started the motors and the route was chosen by a definite wavelength and beam controlled wireless-power.

And so, a mile from Sathiro Cherog Ha flicked the switch to " Stop," and they got out. " Who restarts the machine?" Headlam asked as they walked away.

" Starts itself, Excellency," Cherog Ha replied. " Time switch, master control."

" All very simple when you know how!" Wilson grinned as they walked in the rays of the setting sun.

Cherog Ha led the way to a small grille set in three courses of brickwork and thus barely protruding above ground level. The grille rested on a countersunk rim and lifted easily. A perpendicular shaft of brickwork with projecting iron rungs every twelve inches seemed black and terrifying, suggesting unknown depths and hidden terrors. One by

one they descended and Parker had silently counted one hundred and ten rungs before the bottom of the shaft had been reached. The opening far above was shrunken and dim, and no light of day reached to these depths. From his pouch Cherog Ha produced a tiny globe with a hinged mask. Turning the mask back, the globe gave a soft, but bright glow. Cold light! A glass ball filled with a chemical that reproduced the fire-fly's glow everlastingly! The shaft ran off at right angles and a steady current of warm air soughed past their ears. Headlam guessed correctly that they were in a ventilating shaft of the underground city of Sathiro! Deeper and deeper they plunged into the maw of the ventilator system until they reached a particular grating. Cherog Ha raised it and crawled through after a precautionary look round. The three Earthmen followed him. They found themselves in a small, well-lit, tessellated tunnel with a narrow roadway, sidewalks and doors set at regular intervals in the slightly concave walls. Cherog Ha sped to a door, spoke rapidly into a voice tube and the door opened softly.

"My home," he said simply as he ushered them in.

They entered the hall and were met by Cherog Usti and her brother, Cherog Ki. They covered their eyes and bowed low in the customary salutation to overlords.

"The enforcement officer?" Cherog Ha asked.

"Still captive, brother," Cherog Ki replied.

"The Patrol have taken Lunar Lord Lawrence prisoner," Cherog Ha said, and the others gave cries of consternation.

"They will soon be here, then," Cherog Ki exclaimed. "It would be best if we left at once. The Workers' Federation would give us some protection."

"And take the enforcement officer with us?" Cherog Ha asked in caustic tones. The others remained silent. "You know the Federation can only protect and aid us in legal claims. Kidnapping an enforcement officer breaks about a hundred laws to my way of thinking."

"What about something to eat?" Wilson cut in with a peeved expression as he listened to the natives' arguments.

"Certainly, Lord. Sister, their Excellencies have not eaten for nearly two days."

As Cherog Usti hurried away Wilson called out after her: "Two dinners on one plate will do me for a start, my dear!"

"Yeah? Well, you can have it in a detention cell! You're all under arrest!"

Unnoticed by any, the front door had softly opened. Patrolmen in their black and silver uniforms crowded into the little hall, guns in hands, and a grim smile on each visage!

Once again Wilson had to await that long promised meal!

VII.

LAWRENCE prowled round his cell. As yet he had no idea how the interrogation officer had obtained so much information. The scientific explanation merely fogged the issue. Some of the questions the man had put to him were beyond his ability to answer; he was not a banker or industrialist, much less a statesman with a finger on the pulse of international affairs.

How long he had been a prisoner he had no means of knowing. There had been periods of sleep, short and frequent. Meals were served from time to time without regular lapses of hours. Situated as he was, far underground, the hours of daylight and darkness counted for nothing. He had occupied the cell three days, four days? Something like that.

The door of the cell opened and two guards in the familiar black and silver equipage of the Lunar Lords entered; each gripped a levelled paralysing gun in hand. Silently, they motioned Lawrence out into the passage and fell in on each side of him.

Already, quite a group of captives and guards were assembled and Lawrence's heart sank as he espied Parker, Headlam and Wilson amongst them. Then he frowned in perplexity. Surely they had told him Cherog Ha had been killed; why, had he not been present when the young vardi's aerocar had been blasted out of the sky. Yet, here he was with his brother and sister, also under close arrest.

An officer rapped out a command. The procession of captives and guards moved off down a brilliantly illuminated shaft which led to a single, large apartment. As the last of the guards and prisoners entered the room a heavy steel grille clanged shut across the mouth of the tunnel, imprisoning everybody. In the right-hand wall of the room was an armour plated door with a loud-speaker built flush in its centre. Barely had the grille closed than the loud-speaker blared forth a string of names. The door opened automatically. The guards sorted out several natives and hustled them through the armoured door, which was not kept locked. With a ponderous crash the heavy door closed after them and this time there came the audible click of bolts being shot home. After an interval of ten minutes the loud-speaker again called out a string of names. Once more the same procedure. A further ten minutes, then: "The brothers and sister Cherog. Four Men from Beyond!"

The steel door closed behind them. At the end of the passage a panel slid upwards and they found themselves herded into a pen of steel bars. Looking through the cage they saw a vast and ornate apartment which was plainly intended to be a court-room.

Facing them, a few yards distant, was a daïs, on which sat a group of Earthmen wearing purple and silver robes and tall mitres emblazoned with the Lunar Orb in gold thread. The President, or, rather,

presiding judge, sat enthroned apart from his fellows, a thin, elderly man clad in garments that were a cross between a Catholic Archbishop and a Grand Master of Freemasonry. In place of the mitre he wore a coronet and held a sceptre, which terminated in a dazzling glass globe representing the Moon.

Black and silver guards lined the walls of the court and Lawrence noted that the public and court officials were without exception Earthmen.

The charge against the Cherog family was read out: "That they did aid renegade Lunar Lords from the Dark Country Beyond, to the extent of assaulting and stealing the person of Enforcement Officer Vegger, a Lunar Lord, and to offering shelter of their home to the renegade Lunar Lords!"

There was no defence offered; no jury; no summing up or hearing of further evidence. Just the charge and the Tribunal's decision! The judges whispered together and made their decision known to the President. He nodded in grave agreement.

"Life sentence to the Lunar Mines! They will be removed to a place of safe keeping till transport is prepared. They will be removed from the court now, that we may judge the case of the offending Lunar Lords separately."

A cordon of guards surrounded the natives and Cherog Ha gave a wan smile at Lawrence as they were hustled out of the pen.

AS soon as the Cherogs had gone the judges descended from their elevated platform and crowded round the cage-like dock, staring at the four Secret Service men curiously. The President lit a cigar and blew out a cloud of fragrant smoke.

"We will dispense with formalities," he said, and turned to the captain of the black guards: "Clear the court, then you and your men may leave. We will interrogate the prisoners privately. Remain within call, however."

The court emptied within a few seconds and the two groups of men stared at each other across the hemming bars of cold steel.

"Now, which of you is Lawrence?" the President asked.

"I am," said Lawrence, making his tones as insolent as possible.

"So. Colonel Freeman's star investigator. And how much have you discovered of use to you? Precious little, I'll warrant. I expect a man of your intelligence realises that even the little you have learnt is sufficient for us to ensure that you never return to Earth?"

"Granted. I know we're dealing with murderers. But why this elaborate set-up of Lunar Lords—and how it ties up with Mills Incorporated back on Earth is beyond me. It doesn't make sense unless you seek to become the commercial emperors of the world."

The President nodded complacently. His fellow judges listened with interest, smiling bleakly the while.

"We are for the most part Germans. Ably aided and abetted by adventurers from all nations . . ."

"And the sweepings of the American penitentiaries!" Lawrence added.

The President bowed. "Certainly. The criminal-minded have their uses, as you have seen. But only the German has authority here." The President spoke slowly, forcefully, punctuating each sentence with a wave of his cigar. Hitching his fantastic robes about him, he sat in a clerk's chair and began to speak rapidly.

"You have read your history books. Of Bismarck, the Kaiser Wilhelm II, and the greatest of them all —Adolf Hitler! Truly the German people, by reason of their intelligence and kultur, are the destined leaders of the world. But, alas! numerically the lesser breeds have always outnumbered us. The triangular bloc of Powers formed by Britain, Russia and America, completely broke the old-established Fatherland in 1945 and made it impossible for us to accumulate arms for a third attempt at world conquest.

"Happily, we possessed superior brain-power, if not man-power. Already, at the dawn of the twentieth century we had physicists and mathematicians examining space, time and matter. I shall not go into detail regarding the structure of the universe, for I am an economist, not a physicist. Sufficient to say that just after the First World War it was discovered that two bodies can occupy the same space at the same time if their atomic vibrational frequencies differ. In 1949 Karl Muller, partly by design and partly by accident, revealed this world, a shadowy counterpart of Earth—a form of atomic reflection of the original. It occupies the same space, but for a difference of 24 miles, and the same time with a difference of 194 hours back along the Time Stream.

"His first experiments were purely visual; he could not cross from one dimension into the other. Later, in 1950, he built a portable transmitter. He entered this new strange world by erecting an electro-magnetic field which altered the vibrational frequency of the atomic structure of his body to match the frequency of this world! With a portable transmitter strapped to his back, he crossed from one dimension to the other. He entered this new, strange world and explored it. He contacted the natives, saw their strange, underground cities and the many clever inventions at their disposal. He came back and by devious means managed to interest the people who, if Germany had not been shattered by the last war, would rule her to-day. . . . .

"Did it not strike you as being strange that the so-called death of Adolf Hitler—of Eva Braun, his wife, and of their son, the baby Adolf—was never satisfactorily proved? Did you never wonder where so many of their trusted aides disappeared to when the Allies over-ran the Reich? And were never heard of again!"

The captives looked at each other in startled surprise.

" They made their way by devious routes," the President went on, ignoring their wonderment, " to another of the Feurher's secret hideouts in the Bavarian mountains. They hid while our nation was stripped of all its power—and there Muller found them and told them his great news. Our wise ones saw the value of his discovery. Here, on this Shadow World, was a docile people knowing nothing of warfare, who used the machines and devices their ancestors had created. A people both simple and intelligent, yet credulous enough to believe Muller when he told them he had come from the Moon.

" Docilely, they submitted to the rule of our great Leader and willingly collaborated with our scientists in the reorganisation of their world. At first we had intended populating this world with our own people, but, upon the Leader's death in 1956, our scientists proposed that we could do more damage with an economic war and reap far greater profits by utilising the resources of this world. Our Leader, Adolf Hitler II, now that he has grown to man's estate, believes in this too.

" Much in the way of precious metals and stones from this world provided us with capital to build our depots and stores on Earth. Adolf Hitler II spoke of ' The mills of God grind slowly,' when speaking of the German retribution overtaking Earth, and taking that phrase we created the international distributing organisation called Mills Inc.

" The rest you know. We have brought every government to tottering point. By underselling, which we can do since our labour, raw materials and power is free here—there being no fiscal system in this world—we have smashed all competition and thrown untold millions out of work. Soon our work will be complete. We shall manufacture the necessary arms, cross the dimensional void via our giant transmitters and take the World over in the name of the Fatherland!"

A full minute passed without a word being uttered. Then the hypnotic tension snapped as Parker said gruffly: " Horsefeathers!"

The President rose and gave a smile of acknowledgment.

" ' Horsefeathers,' our prisoner remarks. Nevertheless, neither he nor his companions will live to see whether my statement of his—er—horsefeathers, will be the conclusion of his 15 years' experiment. You see, we are going to transmit you back to Earth. No, don't think I'm going silly in my old age. You are going to be sent to our old depot at Salt Lake City, only we have discontinued using that depot for some time now, and the receiving chamber has been dismantled. Where you will go or what will happen to you I cannot say. I expect you will hover as a kind of disembodied spirit, each of you, between one Space-Time Continuum and another for all Eternity!"

The guards were summoned. The prisoners were hustled out and herded into a large cell under the court room. The door slammed on them and they were left to their own devices.

VIII.

" WELL, here's a fine go!" Wilson exploded. " What do we do now?"

" Lord knows," Lawrence replied as he examined the empty cell and its formidable door. " I wish I were the reincarnation of Houdini; I might have an answer to your question, Wilson, old man. As things are, we've had it."

Time dragged by slowly. Conversation lagged. Parker slept fitfully in the solitary bunk; Wilson dozed in a chair. Headlam and his chief, for the want of something better to do than await their fate with resignation, examined their cell for the tenth time. The apartment was quite roomy; a good twenty feet by fifteen in measurement. Being underground, there was no window. In its place a large ventilator grille gave the chamber fresh air and warmth. The walls were made of glazed concrete blocks, as was the floor. The ceiling, well beyond reach, was also constructed of the impenetrable concrete. The door alone was the vulnerable spot, yet even this seemed proof against the most violent assault, for it was of solid steel set in a steel frame, with concealed hinges, and access to the lock was from the outside only.
gret.

Lawrence tugged thoughtfully at his lower lip. " We'll have to try the old gag," he said with a shrug of the shoulders. He crossed over to the cell's solitary wash basin and picked up the tablet of coarse yellow soap. With his thumb nail he scraped long, curly slivers of soap on to an old envelope. He smiled faintly as he said, " Eenie, meenie, miney mo—you're it, Wilson! Come on, chew well and throw a dummy!"

The stout M.I.5 man blinked apprehensively as Lawrence picked up the envelope of soap shavings.

" It's enough to make me sick," he declared.

" That's the idea. You're going to have a fit and froth and bubble at the mouth. As we can't shift the grating we must induce the guards to open the door."

WITH great reluctance, Wilson poured the soap chips into his mouth and chewed. Varying degrees of distaste flitted across his face and he belched mightily as the crude, soda-charged fumes penetrated his interior. Soon he began to dribble a thick froth and lay down on the cell floor. At Lawrence's signal a tremendous hub-bub burst out. Chairs and table went flying and Parker and Headlam struggled realistically with the writhing, kicking Wilson. Lawrence hammered on the cell door, yelling: " Quick, quick; one of the men is having a fit!"

The spy-hole flicked open and a startled guard stared at the plunging, foaming man being restrained by his companions.

"Epilepsy, by gosh!" he exclaimed, and shouted for help. Two more guards came running up and the first one pressed the button that controlled the electric lock of the cell door. The guards shouldered Lawrence aside and as the third guard entered the Secret Service man dealt him a savage blow at the base of the skull. He caught him deftly and extracted the fellow's paralysing gun from the holster as he eased him to the ground. The others, in the uproar, had not heard the sound of one of their number being scientifically knocked cold and their startled gaze was riveted on the "epileptic" Wilson. They never knew what actually had happened, for the next instant Lawrence, not knowing the effects of a full blast from a paralysing gun, burnt every nerve out of their bodies and they were dead before they hit the floor!

"Quick! Into their uniforms," Lawrence rapped out and began divesting the guard whom he now found had also died when he had dealt him that terrific blow on the base of the skull. But not for one instant did Lawrence feel a twinge of re-

Wilson scrambled to his feet and dived to the wash bowl. Gargling and spluttering, he washed out every vestige of the burning, acrid soap and only desisted for lack of breath. By then the switching of clothes had been completed and the three fake guards marched out of the cell with Wilson as their apparent prisoner under escort. Lawrence led the way along the corridor and then up the stairs back into the still vacant court room. He had spotted the judges' entry to the court by means of a carefully screened door, and this he approached cautiously. Easing it open gently, he peered through the crack and saw that it led into a kind of rest room, study and robing room combined. The room was empty and the four men entered quietly, closing the door after them. Since the judges' robes hung there, on dummies, the big cupboard in the corner probably held further changes of clothing. Lawrence guessed right, for it was stuffed with a variety of uniforms and vestments. By sheer luck, an ornate uniform of silver and black fitted the corpulent Wilson perfectly, and the amount of silver braid on it would suggest that it was the property of some high ranking officer.

Actually, that uniform was their salvation. Every time in their seemingly endless journey through corridors, tunnels and offices, the occupants would leap to their feet, click their heels and salute Wilson smartly.

THEY finally reached a bay where many cars stood parked in long, silent rows. One of these flaunted a little black flag with five silver moons from its radiator cap. Lawrence took a chance and opened the driving door. The car guard spat out an oath and sprang forward with a cry of protest. Silently Lawrence pointed to the five silver moons in a pentagon on the left breast of Wilson's uniform. The guard fell back with mumbles of apology and much saluting.

They drove off, Lawrence managing the strange controls very well considering that his only experience lay in the watching of Cherog Ha driving his identically controlled aerocar when they had taken Vegger a prisoner to Sathiro.

"That car guard rumbled us," Wilson mumbled as he dabbed at his soap blistered tongue.

"Like all Jerries, he's been taught to obey, not think," Lawrence replied as he conned the sleek silver and white machine into the exit tunnel. "A uniform is a uniform and a commission something to worship and obey instantly."

"Sure, Chief. But though his aerocar belongs to a five moon man, and I'm wearing a five moon uniform, he knows I'm not the five moon man this car belongs to. Get me?"

"A trifle involved," Lawrence smiled. "But it's good sense. I think we'll get moving as soon as we clear the tunnels. Look, there's the exit gate ahead!"

Now came the final, the supreme test. The car rolled to a halt. The gate guard strolled from his booth, but he became more brisk when he caught sight of Wilson's five moon insignia. He saluted smartly as Wilson signed him to open up. He hesitated and mumbled something about "the necessary pass."

"The driver's got it," Wilson snapped.

"No; you have it, sir," Lawrence replied in mock surprise.

"Never mind. Open that gate," Wilson reiterated.

"But, High Commander—no pass. I can't!" the shocked guard stammered. "Orders are strict, sir. Gates to be opened only for an exit pass!"

"Who gives the orders here?" Wilson roared, every inch of him quivering with outraged Teutonic arrogance.

"You do, High Commander, you do," the unlucky wretch mumbled as he hurriedly backed away and fled to his cubbyhole of a guard office. He pressed a switch and, with a faint rumble, the great steel gate swung open on its gimbals—and blessed daylight speared through!

They shot out into the road leading to the cross-country highway. As they cleared the shaft a faint moaning of a siren far below came up to them.

"Ten to one it's the alarm, Chief," Parker growled. "We're missed from the cell or that goddam guard reported our taking the car. Or it may be the gateman reported to Control about our not having a pass."

Lawrence's sole reply was to cram on all speed and take to the air as soon as possible. The aerocar hurtled along at a breath-snatching pace and the air

shrilled and thrummed past them. Soon all sight of the entrance and exit shafts vanished, nor did there seem to be any pursuit. They may have been missed from their cell, but he did not think the theft of the car had been reported.

The familiar building with camouflage door and no windows, standing in complete isolation, loomed up. This time Lawrence flew over and around it. No other sign of entry in the whole mighty edifice.

" I've an idea," Lawrence murmured. He brought the aerocar to ground in a rather bumpy fashion and rolled up to the carefully concealed doors. He sounded his hooter and silently a section of apparent wall slid aside!

" Cherog Ha had a sound controlled lock to his house door and I thought this might be the same for vehicular traffic," he explained.

Two guards inside saluted stiffly at the sign of the five silver moons. Lawrence brought the aerocar to a standstill and they got out. A man in an officer's uniform surmounted by a white coat overall came up and saluted smartly. He addressed Wilson in German: " The High Commander wishes to inspect the despatch plant?"

" Ja!" Wilson grunted, for he knew enough German to gather the gist of the fellow's conversation and reply in a non-committing monosyllable.

IX.

THE building proved to be a vast storehouse with every type and kind of product marketed by Mills Inc., on Earth. It seemed there were half a hundred of these storehouses on this strange Shadow World with corresponding receiving storehouses hidden in the most remote localities on Earth. From here, in this building, everything was being transmitted to a duplicate building on the Swedish-Norwegian frontier a score of miles from Tornea and shipped out of a Norwegian fiord to Baltic Europe depots of Mills Inc.

Crates of tools and utensils, bales of cloth, machinery, power units and motor-cars. Jams and foodstuffs, chemicals, rare metals and stones and salts; all these things mounted on conveyor belts and trundling their way to the transmitting chamber.

The conveyor belt was constructed of metal slats on an endless chain, and this metal alone was not transmittable. Thus everything else on the belt vanished, and it was an eerie sight to watch the endless procession of merchandise pour along to the huge transmitting chamber and a totally empty conveyor belt emerge and go on its return journey to be reloaded. And, as they watched, Lawrence got the idea for the perfect escape.

" Get back into the aerocar," he whispered surreptitiously, " while Wilson gives his orders in German. We are going to drive on the conveyor and be transmitted back to our own dimensions!"

Luckily, despite Wilson's rather shaky knowledge of the Teutonic language, he managed to put across his command in a sufficiently authoritative manner to make the surprised supervising officer jump to it and see the conveyor belt was cleared for the High Commander. By that time Lawrence and the others were back in the aerocar and he brought the machine to a standstill at the foot of the ramp leading up to the conveyor belt. Wilson climbed in and gave the supervising officer a perfunctory salute and the car mounted on to the moving belt.

Lawrence stopped the aerocar for he reckoned the belt speed was pre-determined, in the first place, by the rate of atomic vibrationary change in the transmitting chamber, and to pass through too quickly might have disastrous effects on the car and its occupants.

As the belt crept along at walking pace the semi-hidden door of the building once again opened.

A white patrol aerocar rolled into view and out tumbled a group of black and silver guards, paralyser guns in hand.

"Stop that belt at once!" the leader yelled.

So strongly ingrained was obedience to the cry of an order that the mechanic at the control board instantly opened two switches and the belt ceased moving with a faint, protesting rumble.

"Quick, drive on," Parker urged and Lawrence immediately put the car into motion. The leader of the patrol sprang forward towards the control board. As he ran he shouted a string of orders. The mechanic's hands flew from switch to switch and he gasped as the import of the patrol leader's instructions sank in. " Salt Lake City depot, captain? But that's disconnected!"

" The High Council's orders!" the captain snapped. " They were sentenced to be extinguished that way, anyhow. Since they're so bent on transmitting themselves so much the better!"

" But a High Commander!" the supervising officer protested.

" High Commander nothing. They're escaped prisoners in stolen uniforms and aerocar. Quick, over to the Salt Lake wave band!"

Unknowingly, the four Secret Service men congratulated each other on their narrow escape from recapture as their stolen aerocar rolled into the transmitting chamber. And as they entered the wave band was changed over to Salt Lake City!

WITHIN seconds the pleasant tingling sensation made itself felt, then the unspeakable chill of remote space stung and there came a brilliant flash followed by a deep sighing sound.

Transmitting chamber, conveyor belt, everything had vanished. The aerocar tilted crazily and began to fall with frightful velocity! Lawrence gripped the wheel desperately as his companions lurched about like peas in a can. He fumbled feverishly at the control panel. The machine came to life and he gunned the motor viciously as he fought to control the plunging vehicle. They were some five thousand feet above ground level, spinning crazily in a crash dive!

What had happened no one knew.

Twice the falling aerocar turned over and finally righted itself with a sickening, vicious swoop a bare couple of hundred feet above ground. Then, with appalling speed, but on an even keel, it flew steadily. Lawrence cut down the velocity and conned the terrain below.

In the distance a small town could be seen and as they approached it Lawrence dropped the aerocar on to the broad highway below. Not far from them where they touched ground a child was playing outside a tumbledown shack and Lawrence hailed him.

" Understand English, son?"

" Sure, mister," the little boy replied.

" What's that town ahead?" Lawrence asked, nodding to the distant buildings.

" Park City. Say, you ' G ' men? What funny uniforms you're all wearing."

" Park City. Where the hell are we?" Lawrence muttered to Wilson. The little boy had keen sense of hearing, however, and said proudly: " Park City!" then, pointing in the opposite direction, " Salt Lake City!"

" Ye gods! Back on Earth—in America!" Wilson cried excitedly. " I thought they were transmitting to Tornea."

Lawrence turned the car round and headed for the capital of Utah. His brow creased in thought. Then the solution became apparent. The judges of Preemi had decided to transmit them to Salt Lake City depot. This depot was no longer in use and the receiving unit dismantled. Through imperfect knowledge of the subject, but quite reasonably, they thought the Secret Service men would be stranded bodiless between the Dimensions. And the patrol had carried out the sentence as they had entered the transmitting chamber without their knowledge.

" Where they went wrong," Lawrence explained, " was in forgetting that the inventor, Karl Muller, was able to enter Preemi without the necessity of a receiving unit and that it must work thus in reverse. A receiving unit will merely focus transmission to a particular point. Thus, without the Salt Lake City depot we found ourselves automatically materialised some 5,000 feet above ground level; the difference of plane levels between the two worlds!" Lawrence paused. " And now," he continued, " we're heading for Federal Headquarters in Salt Lake City to blow the gaff! In other words, the world authorities will seize every Mills depot and pour troops through into Preemi and put a stop to this economic war!"

The aerocar, strange and wonderful creation of an alien civilisation in a Shadow World, rushed on to accomplish its mission.

Editorial . . .

From this very moment, as you read this, the history of Mankind stretches behind us for millions of years, its roots lost in the antiquity of unrecorded events that *were*, pieced together in rough outline only by the painstaking efforts of research workers, historians and archæologists.

The past is fixed and unalterable.

Of that there can be no doubt. All the great and little things which shaped that history are now submerged in countless "yesterdays," having brought us through a maze of complex *possibilities* to fix for eternity what *was*.

That is history up to the present moment.

But from here on, the future looms ahead as a bewildering Land of If, governed by the whims and passions of individuals, by the power of Governments, by the discoveries of scientists, even by the failures and catastrophies which beset us. The mere fact that you suddenly decide to cross a street has its minute effect upon the future. A whole series of events may or may not emerge from the fact that you did or did not cross the street at that particular moment.

So we have the future history of Mankind hingeing upon any one of an unguessable number of *possible* lines. The fulfilment of each line being determined only *if* certain events take place. The dazzling heights of achievement and the dark depths of failure can all be found in those miriad possible "tomorrows." With one great discovery now within our grasp—the secret of atomic power—Man can reach to the stars, or return to the ooze from whence he crawled long eons ago. He can write his name in letters of fire across the heavens or obliterate it entirely from the scroll of Time itself.

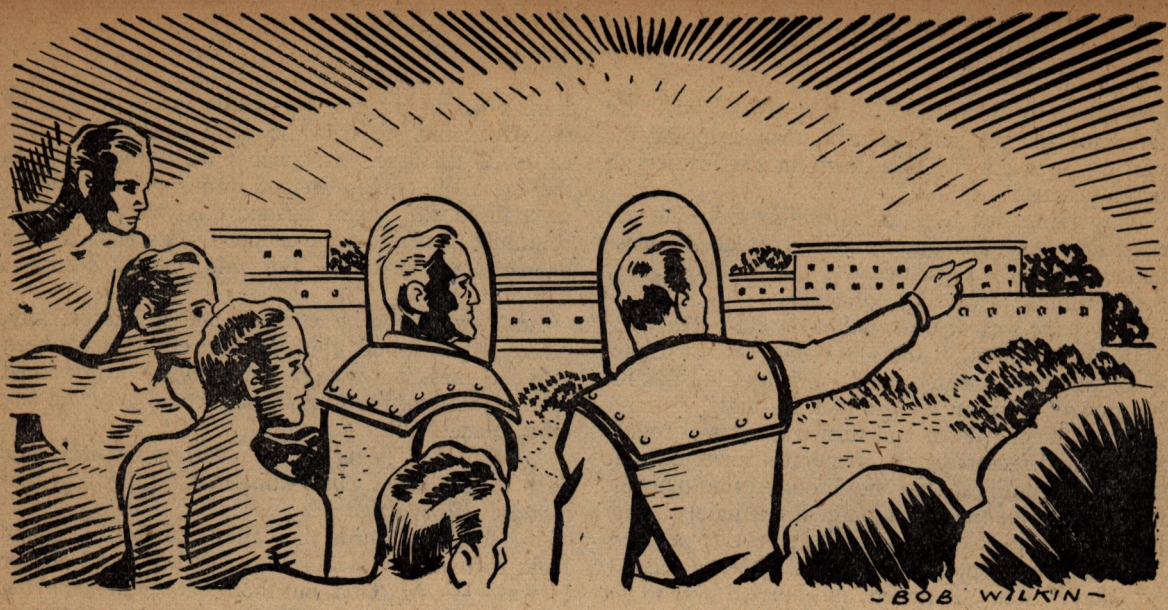
These are but two of the possible future "history" lines science alone is shaping. Which one of the many will eventually become the fixed one of the recorded "tomorrow ?"

Within the pages of this and future issues of New Worlds we present for your reading enjoyment thought-provoking stories based upon possibilities of the future. Travel outside the Earth's air envelope can no longer be dismissed as an impossible dream, for with the dawn of the Atomic Age the last serious problem chaining Man to his home planet has been erased—a suitable power supply. It needs harnessing properly though. Very much so.

We invite our readers to send us their comments upon this issue and their story preference. We will endeavour to shape future issues to include everyone's favourite theme, although this will not always be possible.

We also suggest that to ensure receiving your copy of the next " New Worlds," on sale in approximately eight weeks time, you place an order with your news dealer *now*. Paper restrictions and other factors will still make it difficult for everyone to obtain a copy.

THE EDITOR



SOLAR ASSIGNMENT

By MARK DENHOLM

The planet Pluto may be what it seems, but two roving reporters in space find a different answer.

LEN DAYTON peered through the main observation window of the spaceship, made a wry face, fixed his blue eyes on the cold, merciless darkness of Pluto. To he and Rex Lanson was reflected the starlit wastes of this outcast of the Sun's family, desolate beyond belief, frigid outpost of the Solar System.

" Maybe we're crazy," was Rex's comment at last as he rubbed his red hair, " but don't forget that the Ed. will be even crazier if we don't bring back a story worth printing this time. We've fallen down on most of our assignments so far. This is our last chance."

Len grunted, wondered whether he had been a fool to suggest coming out this far in the hope of finding something. For the normal space routes limited themselves at Neptune; and even within the orbit of that planet it was no picnic. Telescopes had already shown that Pluto wasn't worth the extra hazard. It was only dead rock anyway.

" Funny how a journalist's instincts drive him on," Rex sighed. " But we've gone up a gumtree all right. I think we'd better be getting home and prepare for the wrath to come. Six fuel containers used up and no results! Wow! Will the chief burn when he sees the mess we've made of our roving commissions!"

Len turned back to the controls disappointedly, forced the vessel into a jolt of speed to break it away from the heavy little planet's field, then he hesitated with his hands resting on the switches, his eyes gazing fixedly through the port.

" Say," he breathed, " what in cosmos is that?"

Rex joined him again. Down there, now they had come to a different part of the frozen world, there was something glinting, throwing back the light of the diamond-bright stars. It was fairly large—had to be indeed—to catch so much reflection. Water was not possible on a world like this. Ice? Well, perhaps, if it were highly glazed.

" Looks like—glass," Rex said, and he spoke in a hushed tone as though afraid he was sounding ridiculous.

" Glass! Here?" But Len Dayton's voice

wasn't exactly scornful: it was bewildered. He stared for another long moment, then, gripping the controls, he swept the ship down amidst feathers of rocket exhaust.

They came low over the gleaming portion, and transiently they saw quite clearly that an immense dome of glasslike substance was indeed bulging out of the summit of a rocky eminence.

"It's some sort of observation tower!" Rex cried excitedly. "Think of that—way out here on Pluto, of all places. A story, man—a story! Take the ship down: we want a close look at this!"

Len nodded, twisted and turned the vessel round, crossing and recrossing the dome at a lower altitude each time, until at last he brought the machine down gently on the black plain immediately under the towering rock on which the dome was perched.

The engines stopped. Tense, still-quiet descended.

"Okay?" Rex questioned, and hurried over to get spacesuits.

In a few minutes they were provisioned and armed, left a single guiding beam on their vessel, then stepped outside. Above them over the airlock the beacon light glowed with a solitary splendour in the dreadful darkness.

Here, indeed, was a world of eternal night, so distant from the sun that the primary was but an over-bright Venus in the infinite remoteness, blazing a little brighter than the hosts of other stars and nebulæ.

The feet of the two men, encased in heavy tinium waders, crunched through powdered substance, which was half crumbled rock mixed with ice javelins and crystallised air. That there was air at all surprised them; they had always thought Pluto to be utterly devoid of it. Certainly, it was at an extremely low density, for even through their spacesuits they could feel the merciless cold trickling into their beings—cold which had the sting of instant death if the slightest flaw developed in their coverings.

THEY didn't bother to talk through their intercoms as they trudged to the foothills of the giant rock needle. Indeed, speech was something which had become a needless faculty. Dead silence was the thing: silence to match up with the weighted oppressive tomb into which they had come.

Finally Len untied the wire rope from his tackle, handed one end of it to Rex. They linked their waist belts together, then began the slow, tedious climb up the frozen rock face. It was dangerous work, with death as the reward for miscalculation. Up above their heads, three hundred feet and more, loomed the summit they were determined to reach.

The higher they went the more complete became their view of the terrain, and it was something certainly never vouchsafed to the most ambitious Earth mountaineer.

Being a small planet, though its density produced a gravity comparable with Earth's, Pluto's horizon was correspondingly nearer and the range of vision from a height far greater. Halfway up the Needle the two could see that the plain ended in a deep valley. In the base of it, couched under the stars, was the dense Plutonian mist and immovable mounds of crystallised air. Then, beyond this valley, the plain continued until it was chopped off clean by the backdrop of the stars. For wild, deadly beauty it had no equal.

Rex switched on his intercom and said laconically, "Say, whoever built this dome here must have been nuts! Unless it was a crazy astronomer who wanted a nearer view of the stars than he could get from any other planet."

"Talking of being nuts . . ." Len's voice came back to him in an awed whisper, "I think I'm that myself! What's *that?*"

He nodded towards the valley and Rex turned to look, then he frowned. Either it was a mirage or he was—— My God, but there *were* figures moving down in the valley! Glowing figures indeed, as though soaked in phosphorescence. Nor were they the fantastic forms one might have expected to see on an alien world, but very human looking men!

Now and again the dense mists hid them from sight, then again they would emerge, walking rhythmically like robots up the valley side. In the airless expanse distance was deceptive. Possibly they were still a mile distant.

"They—they're alive all right!" Rex gasped at last, and sensed his spine crawling. "But what in hell are they?"

"Search me," Len said nervously—for he *was* nervous and made no pretence of being otherwise. The occurrence was positively mind-shattering on a supposedly dead world. Finally, he pulled forth his night glasses and held them to the glassite eyepieces of his helmet. A long whistle came through Rex's intercom.

"They're men sure enough—and Earth men, to judge from their looks! They're glowing and they're stark naked! Who'd start a nudist colony on a world like this, I wonder?"

Something of Len's natural dry humour came to his rescue, but both of them looked at each other soberly in the starlight. It was utterly impossible, as they knew, for anything human to exist in such a temperature and near-vacuum.

Then suddenly, as they watched, the men vanished again in the mist. Rex glanced up at the frowning summit of the Needle.

"What do we do, Len? Forget the story and push on?"

Len thought of an editor slow burning back on Earth and then set his jaw.

"Like hell! With all this gathered around us we might get a yarn which will stand the *Cosmisheet* on its ear. . . . Those men were perhaps light delusions . . . or something."

Rex knew he was only saying that to console himself. That the men were no longer apparent was the fault of the mist. They did exist. . . .

"WHAT ARE we waiting for?" Len snapped suddenly, and with that they resumed their climb but now with increased energy. Their spines were tingling at the thought of those ghostly beings coming inexorably after them. Better to fight them at the pinnacle top if they had to, than on these treacherous slopes.

Higher they went up the smooth-faced glaciers, managing it somehow with rope and toe-and-finger-hold, staggering finally to the narrow table-like summit on which the dome was perched. Indeed, it occupied most of the summit: there was precious little room to walk around it.

For a moment they looked back. Far below near the base of the pinnacle the six shapes were visible again, still marching with implacable resolve. In the other direction the orange beam of the spaceship's guide-light shone.

"Let's get busy," Len growled. "We've got flame guns for these walking Roman Candles if they start any trouble."

They clambered over the rocks separating them from the dome, finally reached a point where they could gaze down through it. Its entire hemisphere was covered with a film of perfectly pellucid ice—had probably remained there ever since its erection in this searingly cold waste.

And through this barrier the two men stared down on to the unbelievable. Below them, dimly lit by the pitiless stars, was some kind of observation room. They could catch the faint reflection from numberless instruments, all of them indeterminable in their outlines. This, though in itself amazing enough, was by no means as remarkable as the sight of an Earthman sitting at a bench, head fallen on his pillowed arm, the other arm stretched outwards to end at some kind of notepad under his motionless hand.

"Suffering comets, is this a story!" Rex whispered.

Len fumbled in his belt and dragged out his torch. The white beam he directed below brought the man into clear relief, showed that he was still young apparently—or had been when death had caught up on him. He had strongly set shoulders, a black haired head and powerful neck.

Len mumbled his mystification. "What in heck do you make of it? An Earthman *here?* There is nothing in the archives of space to match up with it!"

"Dead—or just asleep?" Rex mused; then he glanced back anxiously towards the edge of the plateau. "No sign of those walking ghosts yet, so how about trying to get inside this dome? We might get better protection, too, if it comes to a spot of slugging."

This started them investigating, but all their searching drew a blank. The dome was solidly sunken into the rocks without the least sign of anything to suggest an opening or airlock. Finally Len tugged out his raygun and fired it at the glass experimentally. Immediately there was a fissuring, splitting impact as a gap of some three foot width was shattered in the curved wall.

"Big enough to get through anyway," Len murmured. "I figured that sudden intense heat after years of eternal frost might do the trick. Let's go."

He eased himself down through the rent, dropped lightly into the long-forgotten observation room. In a second or two Rex had alighted beside him. Their torches blazing they stared about them in bewilderment.

They could see now that the smashing of the dome had made no appreciable difference to the interior temperature of the place. Everything was covered with a film of ice, and the air pressure gauges, when Rex scraped the frost from their faces, showed a pressure pretty close to the external vacuum. In any case, the man himself was proof positive. He was frozen into a half lying position, as hard as granite.

"Frozen to death and completely preserved," Len muttered. "He just couldn't decompose. . . ."

He stared at him thoughtfully, at the strong, though hopeless looking face and glazed eyes. Then his gaze travelled along the frozen, outthrust arm to the hand still holding a queer stylo pen between immovable fingers. Under the hand was an ice-glazed mass of metalfoil, and upon it a number of notes.

Struck with a thought, Len used his raygun on quarter power and thawed the ice round the notepad, dragging it free. It looked like some kind of log—twenty-six metal sheets of it—and ending in the middle of a line. But, damnably, the language was utterly foreign to him. Even the hieroglyphics made no sense.

"Guess this isn't going to tell us much," he growled, thrusting it in his suit pocket. "Keep it, just the same."

"I suppose," Rex asked dubiously, "he is an Earthman?"

"Seems little doubt about it, but don't ask me what period of time he belongs to. Looks as though he was an astronomer, to judge from this tackle—but the stuff is way ahead of anything we've got even to-day, and the Twenty-First Century ain't exactly backward, either."

Rex looked about him thoughtfully. "I don't see how he could live here alone, without anybody else. There must be an exit from this chamber, surely?"

He turned, intending to look more thoroughly, but at the identical moment a vibration and rattling overhead, vaguely transmitted by the thinnest of air, caused him and Len to glance up sharply. They fell back, watching.

It was not, as they had fully expected, the six ghost men, but instead an object like a monstrous icicle, slowly extending itself, creeping down investigatorily through the crack in the dome. At first it seemed to be stealing down like a frigid finger, but gradually it was forced on the two men

that this was but an illusion. Actually the stuff was elongating itself by adding more crystals to its main mass with a speed which was positively magical.

"What—what is it?" Rex gulped. "It's nothing like those six men we saw——" He broke off in alarm as the stuff suddenly thickened and increased its speed tremendously.

Like a mass of living ice, hurling back a multitude of lights from the torches trained on it, the substance creaked and swelled through the fissure, obviously alive, searching for something.

And gradually it became apparent to the awe-struck Earthmen what it was looking for——

It was heading for the frozen man at the bench!

"SAY," Rex whispered, forcing himself to be calm, "it looks like—like frozen protoplasm. If there is such a thing! Frozen life. . . . Living stuff at zero!"

Len's only response through the intercom was a fascinated grunt. Then he and Rex gave a startled jump as the stuff at last contacted the motionless man.

There was something horrifying about the way it branched out into a myriad fine, stretched tendrils, enveloped the man in a cocoon of ice strands. Firmly, slowly, the stuff got a hold on him, then, by some inexplicable process, seemed to sink into him. In a similar strange manner the stuff broke away from the main bulk in the dome fissure. This mass promptly withdrew into the Plutonian dark and left the gap clear: the remainder simply oozed into the man at the bench until there was not a trace left.

"Suffering hell, what sort of a planet is this, anyway?"

Rex's voice was shocked beyond belief. He could feel himself sweating with fear inside his heavy suit.

Len frowned over formulating an answer, but before he could get it the man at the bench suddenly jerked—moved—and came to life! With a huge and oddly mechanical effort, he reeled to his feet, just like a manikin jerked by wires. Frost shards splintered from his board-stiff clothing, left gaping rents. His eyes, blank and staring, turned to the two men with an absent glare.

Sensing danger, Len whipped his flame gun forward, but to his amazement, the revived man worked with even greater speed, whipped up a frosty weapon from the bench and fired it. Len felt his gun whizz from his stinging fingers. He was unhurt, but certainly stupefied with amazement.

"Nice going!" he panted into his external mike. "What happens now?"

The man motioned significantly to the gap in the dome.

"I think he wants us to leave," Rex muttered. "And in his present mood I'm quite agreeable. First time I ever figured I'd be given orders by a lot of ice water anyway. I suppose that stuff is completely in control of him?"

They moved across the chamber until they were under the dome, then, clambering on the bench, they eased their way through the crack to the exterior. Here they got another shock. Grouped about the spot were the frozen six they had seen in the valley—and behind them again a palpitating mass of luminous crystal life which surged, ebbed, spawned and flowed over the utter dark of the plain.

"Seems to me that they are not really luminous," Len muttered. "It's the crystal life in possession of them that makes 'em look that way. Guess this gets curioser and curioser, to quote one Alice."

"Wonder where we go from here?" Len said. "Better hang on to your gun, fellow. With mine gone we may need it——"

The words were hardly spoken before that gun went too! One of the frozen men had stolen up from behind and snatched it from its holster, hurled it far away.

"What the hell!" Rex exploded, his fury getting the better of him—and he dived for the gun frantically. It was too late though. Before he could reach it he was seized by three of the men, whirled round, and then lifted on high. Though protected by his spacesuit, he could feel the icy grip of those hands, sending the flowing cold of the void into his being.

He struggled and fought like a demon as he saw Len being similarly treated, but for both of them the effort was useless. It was three to one in any case, and the man with the gun was in charge.

"Stop struggling," Len called suddenly, as they were carried swiftly to the plateau's edge. "One rip on our suits with these icicle hands of theirs and we're finished."

He was right there, Rex realised, so he relaxed and resigned himself to the uncomfortable, bumping, dangerous journey at the hands of the captors as they began to descend the side of the Needle.

IN surprisingly quick time they completed the descent, crossed the plain and made for the valley. The two men had long since given up trying to imagine where they were being taken, but finally they realised that they were underground, being carried through a short tunnel of densest darkness.

Then light began to grow upon them. They noticed that they passed three mighty airlocks, each swinging wide open—and these gave not on to a cavern, but a complete underground city, its most dominant feature being four Cyclopean pillars of rock reaching upward to support the curving roof rock.

Set on their feet again, they stared about them wonderingly.

The light was provided by glowing tubes in various parts of the city, so arranged that they threw all the squat, many-windowed buildings into a grouping of silhouettes. It seemed evident that the city had been planned originally with stream-lining, but had had to stop short because of the limitations of the cavern. The final result was a squat, power-

ful looking metropolis with orderly streets, parks, resting places and flat roofs.

But nothing vehicular moved anywhere. And the trees that should have been green were petrified grey images of cold. Indeed, nothing was moving except frozen grey men here and there, going about tasks known only to themselves.

Len glanced back finally to the open locks leading to the outer tunnel and Plutonian dark.

"There is no more density of air here than there is outside," he murmured. "Nothing human could live in this—not even vegetation, either, if those trees are any guide."

He stopped talking as he found himself nudged. Perforce he and Rex had to move on again, walking slowly and curiously along the main street of the city. It was about the most extraordinary experience they had ever had.

From what they could make out, the buildings on either side of them had been designed in the first place as human habitations. Everything connected with them suggested earthly comforts—but, like everything else, these comforts were frozen into a common pattern of grey and gleaming ice-film.

Even the huge hall into which they were finally conducted was little better. It was vast in proportions, had obviously once been a place of assembly. Right now it seemed too fantastic for words as the grey men came into it with their blank eyes staring ahead of them. . . . Slowly, mechanically, they formed into a circle round the baffled Earthmen.

"You—you are men from Earth?"

It was the man with the gun, the last to be "converted" from death to life, who spoke. He had come to the forefront of his fellows.

"Right," Len acknowledged through his external mike.

"You removed a notepad from the watchtower. Hand it over!"

Len's jaw set obstinately, then as his eyes settled on the thing's steadily levelled gun he thought better of it, tugged the metal foils from his pocket and tossed them over. The man studied them, frowning. Finally, he looked up with his dead, lifeless eyes.

"So *that* is the explanation!" he breathed in wonder. "Long indeed have we puzzled over it——"

He broke off and looked at the two Earthmen directly.

"In case you have not already grasped the fact, my friends, we of this world are highly intelligent, but Nature has endowed us with a crystalline physical form, the only form of life indeed which can evolve in a temperature nearly space-zero and an atmosphere nearly non-existent.

"We began to wonder about the strange manlike life living under the surface of our world. We wondered about the dome that projected on to the surface——. And one day we found all these queer men were dead and so decided to make an effort to take over their bodies. To our delight our crystalline forms were able to pass into these frozen human frames. For the first time in our history we had hands and feet, a method of moving ourselves!

"The higher members of our race, whom you see about you now, took over bodies—but even then there was a surplus of crystal material which still needed bodies. One body, in the watchtower, separate from the rest, we dare not investigate for fear there might be air present in dense quantity. Such would have been fatal to us. We could only conjecture about the solitary watcher—have conjectured for many ages indeed, until you came out of the void. Machines registered your arrival, and to our delight you broke the dome. That enabled me to take over that body. But *still* there is surplus crystal. . . ."

The man paused, something grimly significant in his last words. Then, as Len and Rex attempted no reply, he went on:

"I SAW that the record which had lain so long under the man's hand had gone. Only you could have taken it. We have had time to learn the language of the men, of course—and yours too by way of radio transmission. But the cause of these manlike beings from Earth being present here has never been solved—until now."

The man waved the foils in his hand.

"What is it? A log?" Len asked, curiosity ahead of the present danger.

"One might call it a last statement of events," the man replied. "It seems that he was the last of his race. He died voluntarily like his fellows by cutting off the air pumps and opening the valves to the void. Told briefly, it seems that he and his fellows left Earth because the sun was shielded by a cosmic cloud which had entirely enveloped Earth and shut off the luminary. This cloud, it seems, created a Glacial Epoch, of which you may have some knowledge.

"These scientists saw their race dying under the sun-blot. No other planet was safe to visit, so they created a synthetic planet in the void close to Earth by fusing together streams of meteoric matter and adding it to matter projected by their own mammoth space guns. Ultimately, they fashioned a small, heavy world. They migrated to it, fully believing they would be free from the blight enveloping Earth. But something went wrong with their gravitational anchors and their little world was hurled into furthest space, to become—to become this world you call Pluto.

"Here, with the scant few who had survived, and all of them males, which made any chance of perpetuation impossible, they sought the underground, for the atmosphere had almost been whipped away and the Solar heat gone. But our life, cold-life spores which had always remained dormant on Earth's warm surface, came into being in the airless

cold. So our life occupied the surface and evolved into intelligent crystal protoplasm, while below was the type of life about which we had wondered.

"These Earthmen—and the Earthman in the tower particularly, for he was an astronomer—had studied his world to see the outcome of the Blight. He saw that his magnificent race had been reduced to cavemen, the survivors that is, and were walking the icy plains of the now clear world. Atavism, caused by the blocking of vital Solar rays, had set in. . . .

"To return to a world of cavemen was useless: better to wait until they evolved. But evolution only brought wars and strife, so these scientists, virtually trapped in a world of their own making, decided on voluntary relinquishment of life. Thus runs the log. . . . The astronomer in the tower was the last to die and made the final record. . . ."

"So that's the explanation," Len mused. "It explains the Glacial Epoch, Pluto's queer size in relation to the four giant outer worlds, and perhaps even solves the mystery of our mighty extinct civilisations, the remains of which are still found."

"What it explains," said the Plutonian, "is of little importance. Naturally, we are gratified to have the problem solved, but more pressing things concern us. I have explained how we have taken over these dead, frozen bodies for our own purposes—how we are the rightful denizens of this frigid world. I have also mentioned that there is surplus crystal waiting for a home—crystal which you have seen for yourselves. It requires—just two more bodies! Then our race is complete. There will be no limit to what we can do."

Len's eyes narrowed. "So that's the idea, eh? You want *us?* That damned crystal stuff wants to split into two and sink into both of us as it did into the guy in the tower. Try it!" he finished grimly, and then thrilled as his hand clamped on his empty gun holster. He had forgotten his loss for the moment.

"It will not be difficult," the Plutonian said coldly. "One puncture in your suits and your bodies will instantly freeze to the desired hardness for us to take possession. Then we can use your legs, your arms, your tongues for speech. . . ."

He stopped and made a motion. In response the flowing mass of the crystal which had been near the doorway came forward, swelling and flowing as usual within itself.

LEN and Rex stared at it in horrified fascination, unable to absorb the fact that here was a form of Earth life which had never been suspected—zero life—filled with merciless and superhuman intelligence. Perhaps it hadn't been such a mistake on Nature's part after all to pin it down with a useless physical vestment, for given the priceless appendages of hands and feet there were clearly no shackles on its ambition.

"Only one thing to do," Rex murmured through his intercom. "Make a dash for it! The ship's not far away, anyhow, and the valves to the exterior are open. I'm for chancing it."

Len nodded his helmeted head—then suddenly the pair of them swung round, dived for the nearest gap in the encircling men and fled for their lives to the door of the huge chamber. They found they had miscalculated the speed of their foes, however, for, with lightning movements, the zero-men wheeled round, charged after them, barred the doorway with their bodies.

Furious, desperate, Len clenched his fist and drove it with stunning force into the blank, granitelike face in front of him. A cold, sickly chill went through him as he found the power of his punch had knocked the man's head right off! No blood flowed: the body was as hard and brittle as though it had been immersed in liquid air—but there was something revolting about seeing the head go flying, to smash into a thousand splinters on the floor. It had been like hitting a plaster statue.

Len hesitated, appalled—and his horror rose still higher when the man did not drop, but continued to bar the way! Of course! The truth flashed through Len's mind. The creature did not rely on the dead man's nerves, arteries and muscles. He merely used them, could do without them if need be. Instinct was his sole guide. The missing head made no difference as long as the body could move. . . .

With a terrific effort Len mastered himself, punched again. This time he missed and the others came piling up on him. Thick and fast he and Rex hit out, right and left, knocking off the men's fingers here and there, smashing forearms like carrots, generally hurling themselves through the creatures which sought by every possible means to stop them.

The leader came hurrying up and fired his gun. By a fluke he missed—and by that time the two men were through the doorway, pursued by the weirdest assortment of damaged men that ever came out of a nightmare—and behind them again moved that expanding, spreading crystal life.

This stuff indeed was the more deadly by reason of the length to which it could stretch itself and so bar the path. Despite the speed at which the two men travelled, it somehow headed them off as they raced for the still yawning valve-way.

Baffled, Len slid to a stop and looked sharply about him.

"In here!" he panted, nodding to a building.

They dived for the open doorway of the building, then paused a moment as they noted that two of the zero men had gone ahead and were busy closing the valves to shut off all avenue of escape. Then they came back to their fellows and the crystal. Both began to converge slowly on the building where the two Earthmen stood indecisively.

They backed inside, amongst machines. So far as they could tell, the place was some kind of

factory. With their eyes fixed on the damaged men and the crystalline, they did not notice where they were backing, but they suddenly realised with horror that they were stopped against a wall. They could retreat no further.

Len flashed a glance behind him, then swallowed hard. It was not a wall, but the oval side of an immense machine as long as a locomotive, and if it came to that it wasn't unlike one either. It seemed from the brief glance he gave it to be bristling with valves and wheels, its whole ponderous mass connected to a switchboard close by.

Sideways and backwards, there was no escape now. Forward meant another charge at the creatures, but this time they were ready to balk all efforts. And the leader had his gun ready, too, obviously reluctant to use it in case he damaged the potential "carriers" of the crystal life too severely.

"CLIMB on to this machine!" Rex cried. "It's the only thing to do. Might fight them from the top of it."

He set the example by blundering up the side of the machine, hanging on to the wheels and valves to support himself. Len followed immediately, fell back again as one of the wheels span resistlessly in his fingers. Then he was clawing his way up the bellying mass, kicking at the fierce, brittle hands which tried to drag him back.

By dint of hard effort the pair of them reached the top, stood waiting grimly to sell their lives as dearly as possible. All chance of escaping from the machine into the further reaches of the building were negatived by some of the creatures grouping in readiness round the back. To slide down into their clutches would be suicide.

"Okay, let them have it!" Len decided finally, as the first zero-man clawed his way to the machine's top.

He lashed out with the toe of his heavy boot, struck the man under the jaw. It cracked his chin, but he came on doggedly, backed by the rest of his fellows swarming beside him.

Len drew back his fist to the limit, but he never landed the smashing blow he had intended, for the thin, fiery stream of the leader's raygun slashed at him, tore a gaping hole through the sleeve of his spacesuit.

Hardly had Len realised the fact that he was doomed before icy coldness stabbed throughout the interior of his suit. He fell to his knees on the cylinder top, choking hoarsely. In a blur he saw Rex brought down too, brittle fingers tearing the spacesuit from him. Death in this place, steeped in airlessness and space cold, was inevitable.

With swimming brain Len fell his length, hardly conscious of the frantic hands pulling at him . . . then, to his surprise, he felt a sudden heady current of fresh air, so powerful it nearly keeled him into unconsciousness with its intoxicating strength.

He sank limp, drinking it in, feeling himself getting stronger and stronger. The cold was still there, biting in its intensity, but already the void-sting had gone from it. . . . And the air increased suddenly to a positive wind.

Aware that the hands had fallen from him, Len twisted his head round and saw Rex also gulping in the currents swirling about him.

"It's—it's this cylinder!" he shouted huskily. "Air is coming out of it—— Out of these——"

He motioned to immense gratings in the cylinder top from which there was undoubtedly something hissing and rushing. A vague memory stirred Len—— The wheel he had accidentally moved when climbing up. . . .

He staggered to his feet, shreds of his spacesuit still hanging about him. To a slight extent it served to mitigate the tomblike chill. He stared about him.

The zero-men were bundling away from the cylinder as fast as they could go, all ideas of fight banished. Suddenly he understood why they had been so nervy. They had known, of course, that this was an air cylinder, and as the leader himself had said, air was fatal to them.

"Look!" Rex gasped suddenly. "By all that's queer!"

Queer was right. From their high vantage point they saw the zero men fleeing for their lives through the open doorway of the factory towards the valves they had so firmly closed. This indeed had proven their undoing. In trying to cut off escape they had also stopped all chance of the air leaking out—and it was fast overtaking them, swirling in all directions.

They hurried on desperately, the most weird assortment ever, but before they could even reach the doorway of the factory they began to stagger and fall. Then it was that the normal death and disintegration which should have so long ago claimed these frozen Earth bodies, caught up. Each body collapsed into a dissolving mass of putrefaction from which, tortured and smashed by air, escaped long columns of rapidly evaporating crystal life.

In time even the crystal life turned to jelly and ceased to move. Inside ten minutes the only remains of the zero life were splotches of dead matter and dusty piles of lifeless crystal.

"Looks like they finished the job for themselves," Rex said in a sober voice.

"Yeah." Len's face was grim for a moment as he surveyed the remains. Then a smile spread slowly over his face.

"But why the heck are we worrying? Think what we've found! The biggest story ever—the biggest scientific advancement in history! All we have got to do is to weld up these suits and then get moving. . . . We have cameras to photograph everything, sound detectors, all we need to provide proof. Come on, fellow, this is where we have *our* turn!"

KNOWLEDGE WITHOUT LEARNING

By K. THOMAS

He could read people's minds; could take their knowledge from them. But it made Life very complicated.

I WAS still at school when I discovered I had the gift. I won scholarships I had really no conceivable right to win. On prize day I was given the works of obscure authors for my phenomenal brilliance in mathematics, physics, composition and other fields too numerous to mention.

But actually, you know, I was a cribber! Yes, perhaps the world's greatest cribber—a kind of human blotting pad for soaking up knowledge. Put me next to a student with a good grasp of mathematics and at the end of the examination you would find him chewing his penholder to shavings while I sat complacently with all the answers written on the dotted lines. . . .

"Henry Parker," the Head would say benignly, squinting through his glasses in that owlish way he had, "you are a credit to Mulhaven! You are one of the cleverest scholars we have ever had. . . ."

I would stand before him full of meekness, and since I was pretty young then I took all the credit and wondered how in blazes I had done it. For it was an undoubted fact that I had a knack of stealing other people's knowledge and secrets right away from them if I sat near them for long enough. I had only to concentrate—really hard—and the thing was done! It was quite disturbing. . . .

When I was twenty my people died and that seemed to upset the whole routine of my life. I had a little money, but by no means a lot, and since my job in Birmingham did not appeal to me particularly I threw it up and came to London. It had become suddenly evident to me that I had to face the world.

I had forgotten all that I had ever cribbed at school. The immediate task then seemed to be to find a job—and that quite logically suggested it was time to bring my "kink" into action.

For some reason I had always had a deep inner urge to either drive an engine or a motor omnibus. I think the urge can be traced back to my tricycle days: whatever the basic reason, I had never completely suppressed the urge. Suppose, then, I could get a sort of "on approval" idea of how fascinating a bus driver's life could be?

That decided me. Once I had moved into my London rooms I set about exploring the potentialities of the gentlemen who sit all day over a massive steering wheel. . . .

I BOARDED my experimental bus in the Strand and took good care to get the seat immediately behind the driver. I do not think the girl on the same seat quite liked the idea, somehow. You see, the bus was almost empty, and that I should squeeze her up into the corner in order to sit beside her no doubt suggested sundry unethical intentions.

I caught a glance from her cold grey eyes—then, with a high-powered sniff, she went on reading her magazine. Me? I sat gazing at the back of the driver, taking in a view of white dust coat and sandy bristles margined by the back of his greasy regulation cap. I had to be near him in order to " absorb," you understand. But I could not explain that to the girl squashed beside me, could I? Not that she looked too unfriendly, only I'm modest . . . I think.

Off we went. Nothing much happened at first. We picked up a woman with three bawling brats, an Italian with a string of onions round his leathery neck, and a man who sat as erect as a gravestone and looked about as cheerful. I saw all these travellers in the reflection from the glass partition between myself and the driver. In a kind of sideways haze I saw the girl next to me was twisting her ankles round each other and generally shifting and squirming. I knew why—and it was rather surprising.

A midge—an ordinary summer midge—was biting her ankle. I could not see the thing, but her mind was beating into mine and telling me all about it. I also appreciated that she thought I was the frozen limit and needed shooting without trial. . . . Behind all this, in her mind, I saw a certain maze of complexity that seemed to hover between a beautiful flat full of mellow furniture and etchings, classrooms full of young men and women with earnest faces, and a laboratory with odds and ends of apparatus. . . . She was twenty-two, single, a teacher of psychology, adored salads, and loathed young men who sat too close to her.

There was I, storing up all this information and did not want to! I even knew her size in shoes and gloves, that she had had measles, mumps and whooping cough. June Cranby—that was her name. Then, with a deliberate effort, I switched her out of my mind and continued to concentrate on the back of the driver's head. What was it like to be a bus driver? For me, the conception had a fascinating intrigue all its own.

At first I was disappointed. I saw betting slips and stop press news of what had won the previous day's 2.30. Dammit, the man was not concentrating on the job of driving at all! Then it occurred to me that perhaps he knew the job so well he did it automatically. His mind shifted suddenly to a rather unlovely block of cheap lodgings. In front of the block was a mangy dog with a bone, children in grubby frocks and frayed jerseys playing with a whiskery skipping rope. His kids? Judging from the beatific grin now on his profile, yes. But where was the *glamour?* Was he not proud to drive this great vehicle, to feel that hundreds of people a day trusted to him? Somehow I did not think he was. And I did not like his private life either.

Then to my delight he suddenly came to thinking about his job. I saw the bus gears in detail—the clutch, brake and accelerator. In a flash I knew the whole method of controlling this swift, fumy conveyance. I knew exactly how much pressure to put on that foot brake to stop the bus running into that taxi right ahead——

But at that identical moment something went wrong. The driver clapped a hand to his head and fell forward over the steering wheel. Instantly our few passengers gave hoarse shouts. June Cranby looked up in startled wonderment. . . . Then the entire vehicle, missing the taxi by inches, slewed round on to the pavement, sending people scattering in all directions. Two inches from a plate-glass window we stopped dead.

The conductor started yelling out directions—then he subsided as there was a rush for the exit. I just sat where I was, staring mystifiedly, until June Cranby's voice—and a very pleasing one it was too—floated to me from a great distance.

" When you have finished sitting there with your mouth open you won't mind, perhaps, if I pass?"

" Eh?" I said, staring at her. Then I comprehended. I raised my hat in apologetic confusion and stood up. She brushed past me with obvious indignation and hurried outside to the pavement. I followed her, and I assure you it was pure coincidence which brought us together again in the gathered crowd.

" Cheeky blighter! " her thoughts were saying. " Not so bad looking, though. Looks sleepy—else scared. Never can tell with men. . . ."

PEOPLE were all around us, crowded into the hot glare of sunshine. A police officer, looking very greasy and officious, was taking notes and talking to the driver. The driver was waving his arms about like a prize-fighter.

" I didn't faint!" was his indignant protest. " Something went funny. All of a sudden I forgot all I ever knew about driving this thing. The steering, brakes and clutch didn't even—even enter me mind. Me mind was a blank—a total blank."

The officer closed one eye and said, " Yes?" It had a nasty ring about it too.

" You just couldn't forget everything!" protested the man who looked like a gravestone.

The driver swung round to glare at him. " Swipe, me, mister, it's the honest truth. I forgot how to drive! What's more, I *still* don't know how to drive. Call me crazy if you like."

" Perhaps temporary amnesia," suggested June Cranby surprisingly.

" You on the bus too, miss? " the officer asked sharply, then, as she nodded, he went on: " Better give me your name and address. All of you who were on the bus will be wanted as witnesses."

So we gave our names and addresses. At the end of it the woman with the brats opined that we ought to send for an ambulance to take the driver away.

"The Company's own ambulance will be here any moment, madam," responded one of the officials, looking very stiff and very hot. "A fresh driver will take over this bus and——"

"But I tell you I'm well!" our driver broke in suddenly. "Never felt better — only I just don't seem to remember how to drive. . . . Funny, I don't think I know me way home either."

"Definitely neurotic amnesia," said June Cranby's thoughts. "Wonder if that mystical owl who calls himself Henry Parker knows anything about it? Hypnotism, maybe. He stared at this poor fellow an awful lot, right on his neck nerve centres . . ."

She turned to look at me and her words certainly did not match her thoughts. Her coolness had gone.

"Amazing happening, isn't it, Mr. Parker?"

"I suppose it is," I admitted.

Her thoughts said, "He looks as though he might be capable of anything, but I don't think he's crazy. Eyes rather like a codfish, come to think of it. Drink perhaps. . . ."

Aloud she resumed: "I have seen cases like this before, but in different circumstances. The brain centres suddenly refuse to act—a form of paralysis. I'm interested in this sort of thing: I teach psychology, you see. My hobby is telepathy, or anyway its possibilities."

I smiled wryly. "Glad you don't think I'm crazy, anyhow," I murmured. "Sorry, too, my eyes look like a codfish's."

The amazement on her face was almost comical. "But—but you've read my thoughts!" she breathed, having the sense to keep her voice low. Far from being ashamed of her mental tabulations she went on: "It's astounding! Revolutionary! How do you do it? Do you use the Branner or the Curt-Walford System?"

"I don't use anybody's system. It just happens —and it enables me to find out exactly what people think of me. . . . So I'll say good-morning, Miss Cranby."

I turned away with studied finality, but she caught my arm.

"My name, too!" she cried—then she gave a little gesture. "Of course, you heard me give it to the officer. . . . Wait just a minute, please. You're too good to miss."

"Am I?" It was my turn to be cool.

She stopped, thinking swiftly. Her mind went round ideas of lunch, so I said it for her.

"I could tell you a lot more over a café table if you are *really* interested. . . ."

She said nothing to that, but we finished up with salad at Frascati's.

IT WAS surprising how much June Cranby broke down under the influence of lettuce and tomato, or else it was the fact that she believed I was a freak and right in her line of attack. Anyway, after studying me for a time—time in which I had had the opportunity to observe that she had a plain, honest face and chestnut hair—she said:

"To look at you one would never suspect you have telepathic power."

I knew she meant what she said, because her thoughts verified it.

"Well, I have, and there it is. . . . I'm just wandering round the city trying to decide what job to take up. I can take a job on a sort of trial, you see. See which job I like best by learning about it first. . . . That bus driver, for instance. . . ." I wrinkled my nose. "No, I don't think I want to be a bus driver after all. I don't like the background. No glamour, and a vast, frightening sense of confinement."

"I suppose you realise you have done him out of a job?" she asked quietly. "You absorbed his knowledge, so what is he going to do now?"

That aspect of the matter rather dismayed me, for, to tell the truth, I had never given it a thought.

"Hmm, it's a problem," I admitted ruefully.

"A bigger problem than I think you imagine. Do you realise that in running round testing jobs you are liable to put quite a few good men out of work? A gift like yours is only fit for examination by expert psychologists. I know plenty who could help you if——"

"No thanks," I broke in hastily. "I don't trust 'em. . . . And anyway, I don't see that a few more unemployed really matter. I'm unemployed myself, so it is them or me if it comes to that."

She munched tomato reflectively. "Seems a selfish viewpoint. And anyway, why stop at being a bus driver or something like that? Why don't you aim high? Become—become a politician or something."

"I don't want to be something high: it entails too much heavy responsibility. I don't want to be a politician—I want to be something brainy, like—like an engine driver, a driver, a lion tamer or something. . . . See?"

"Hanged if I do!" she said frankly. "You can have all the world—you are unique—and you either want to be an engine driver or go down in the sea and hunt wrecks. It just doesn't make sense that a man with such *mighty* power should not want to use it. . . . I know what *I* would do," she added significantly, and her thoughts registered a vista of total franchise for all women, crushing of every male and to hell with wedlock.

"It's serious, you know," she added pensively. "I think I know what is wrong with you and how you could be cured—if you want. This kink of yours will get you into trouble sooner or later if you don't watch out. Can't I persuade you to let either myself or some other psychologist examine you?"

I shook my head adamantly. "I like my gift, Miss Cranby, and I'm sticking to it. What is more, I need a regular job and I'll find it in my own way."

"Perhaps he is crazy after all," observed her thoughts. Then she got to her feet. "You don't need my address," she said quietly. "You have it already. If you ever want to change your mind come and see me. . . . I'm glad to have met you."

Before I could say anything more she shook my hand and was gone. I was left to pay the bill, and I cannot repeat what the waiter thought about me when I found I had no change left for a tip. . . .

I MUST admit that June Cranby had done something to me. She certainly had precious little sex appeal, but behind her sharp, incisive manner I had detected a good deal of firmly grounded common sense, enough anyway to make me think about her quite a lot after our conversation. I liked her independence, suspected her motives for wanting to examine my grey matter, and inwardly smouldered at the remembrance of eyes like a codfish.

And was I crazy? That remained to be seen. . . . As a matter of fact, I rather wondered if she *could* have explained my abnormal condition. At that time I was not prepared to forgo my ability, but I would have liked to know what made me able to soak up other people's knowledge. . . . I could have ruled the world, yes—but who in hell wants a world anyway? Only dictators and madmen. No: give me a steady job and I'd be entirely satisfied.

I was sorry about that bus driver: the accident was reported briefly in the next day's paper and it seemed they had whisked the poor chap off to a mental home for examination. On the other hand, here was I, knowing exactly how to drive a bus and yet quite uninterested in the accomplishment. I felt inclined for something harder—so I boarded a local train and sat in the compartment nearest the engine so that I could contact the driver's thoughts from the cab.

Since the compartment was empty it was the ideal spot for good concentration. Rather too good, as a matter of fact, for I got the driver's and stoker's private lives as well, together with a knowledge of how to drive and coal a railway engine.

Did I like the knowledge now I had got it? I could not be sure. There was something fascinating about driving down that gleaming ribbon of rail, of course, about holding the power of steam under your fingers—but there, I felt, the fascination ended. No, engine driving was still not quite what I wanted. It had not that certain kick I was looking for. . . . I lay back in my seat, deciding to get off at the next station. Being a local, the train would stop there anyway.

But it did not! The station whisked by at quite a smart pace and we rattled over the points to good effect. If anything, we were gathering speed instead of losing it. Vague, disturbed notions passed through my mind: they changed to positive alarm when we hurtled through the next station in a cloud of dust, whirling papers and shouts from the porters on the platform. . . .

Dropping the window, I stared outside, wind and steam lashing my face. The driver was leaning out of his cab, staring ahead of him.

I bellowed at him, but it was no good, of course. I was trying to talk against the wind. Then he turned his head suddenly and caught sight of me. By pantomiming, I think I made him understand that I wanted to know what was wrong, for he shouted:

"Brakes! I've forgotten how to use 'em! Guard's emergency brake not enough, and I can't stop the damned train. . . ."

I withdrew my head, stunned realisation pouring over me. Of course, I had taken all his knowledge, same as I had with the bus driver. This was darned serious—a runaway train. Up to me to put things right. . . . I do not claim my next actions represented heroism. I performed them through sheer fear of consequences if I did not do something quick.

I climbed out of the window on to the running-board, eased my way along against the wind and steam to the tender, while the driver and fireman watched me in baffled hope and alarm. It was hard going all right—toe and finger hold, but at last I managed to drag myself over the coal and down to the footplate.

The rest was simple. I closed the throttle, applied the brakes gradually, and we pulled up at the next station without mishap. The guard came running up, swearing, as the driver, stoker and myself dropped down.

"What in blazes is the idea?" the guard roared. "Don't you even know that we——"

"I know that I've forgotten how to drive this train!" the driver broke in. "Let me alone, can't you? Same with Jim, here," and he nodded to the stoker. "We've both forgotten what to do. . . . This gent. here saved us by climbing from the first carriage."

"Nothing. Nothing at all," I protested.

But they would have none of that. It seemed that people collected from nowhere off the train, whirled me off into the general waiting room and started to thank me profusely. What happened to the driver and his mate I did not have the chance to discover. My main realisation was of being mighty thankful when I at last escaped.

I TOOK good care to take a bus back to London, and I did not try any fancy stuff on the way either. Matter of fact, I was getting alarmed. The drastic completeness of my knowledge-absorbing trick was getting startling to say the least of it. It would not have been so bad had I been interested in what I had discovered—but I was not. Bus and engine driving were now relegated to my not wanted department. I had got to try something else.

I wandered about the city most of the day, went into a café for tea and opened up my evening

paper. The first column I read gave me the shock of my life. It was headed:

MYSTERY AMNESIA.

The report drew a significant parallel between the bus driver and engine driver and stoker. That was all right. The part that was so alarming was that which referred to me. Yes—to *me!*

". . . and the police are anxious to discover if there is some connection between a Mr. Henry Parker—who to-day saved the 10.12 local by his timely action—and the recent strange happenings. This man Parker, it appears, was present on both the bus and train which met with mishaps. The coincidence is considered of value by the authorities. . . ."

And so on. Things were getting awkward all right. It wasn't so easy as I had thought to go about stealing knowledge out of people's brains. And there was another thing, too. I had put such tremendous effort into absorbing knowledge from the bus and engine drivers that I seemed to have stimulated that queer kink in my brain. Anyway, I found myself instantly and automatically absorbing the knowledge of anybody within five feet of me. . . . I left that café worriedly, knowing exactly how to be a waiter or a cashier.

It was obvious that I dared not go to my rooms. The police would be around there looking for me, and I could not explain my kink to them very convincingly. While I roamed the city I was not likely to be apprehended. Damned ticklish.

I marched along in the evening sunshine, picking up the most surprising knowledge as I travelled, cluttering up my mind with all manner of useless—or at any rate unwanted—knowledge. I found that by the time I had drifted into Hyde Park to sit down and think things over I knew how to be a stockbroker, a street cleaner, a mannequin, a dress designer, a banker, an actor and an auctioneer—as well as my earlier vocations. It filled me with cold horror when I came to think how many people had lost their occupations because of me.

Talk about a human magnet! For that was what I was, and the knowledge of the rest of them was steel filing drawn to my brain. I knew all their private lives—I could have blackmailed the banker and the actor with absolute security had I wanted. All this because I wanted to test out a job! It gave me a bad attack of nerves trying to foresee where I was going to finish up.

From being anxious to find a normal job, my desires swung right round to wanting to escape as far as possible from everybody. I had no wish to go on like this, disrupting the private and innermost thoughts of everybody I came across. I had got to travel—somewhere. I might become a sailor. . . . That seemed a good idea. All I had got to do was find a seaman, use up his knowledge and set out for somewhere—anywhere. Tropics or Arctic, it was all the same.

ABOUT MIDNIGHT I found myself somewhere in the East End dock world, amidst an atmosphere that smelt of sea water, tar and thick ropes. Heavy mist had dropped on the calmness of the summer night, for which I was thankful. Pulling my hat well down over my eyes to escape any possible recognition, I plunged into the nearest dive I could find and sat down at a table amidst a fog of thick tobacco smoke, cheap drink and strong language.

One or two men glanced at me, but that was all the attention I seemed to merit. I ordered a drink, sat with my back to a massive blue-jerseyed seaman and started my absorption act while he went wet round the lips over the faded blonde on the opposite side of his table.

The man's mind was a curious mixture of rolling oceans and obscenity. His background was cluttered up with endless fights, strong drink, storms and engine rooms. I realised by degrees that he was a stoker. That turned me against him. If I had got to go to sea I intended doing it above decks, not below. . . . So I tackled a fellow two tables away, who, from his stripes, I judged to be a first mate.

He was quite an admirable sort of specimen, full of notions of hard work, and he had a good background. Only trouble was that he drank too much. But from his befuddled mind I learned all a first mate should know—and a good deal more besides—the name of his ship, the pier at which it was anchored. The ship—the *Mary Lancer*—would leave on the tide at 11.0 the next morning. He had not seen the vessel yet: only just signed up, I gathered. Suppose I went instead of him? I could be Martin Ward just as well as he could. Without his papers he would be helpless. . . .

I waited, smoking, and watched him through my eyelashes. At last his drinking put him to sleep. Nobody took any notice of him sprawling across the table except me. It was simple to go over and clap a hand in apparent friendly greeting across his shoulder; even simpler to extract his papers from an inside pocket at the same time.

Ten minutes later I was out on the docks again. At length I found a doss-house, crept inside and paid my money, relaxed on a hard bed. My disturbing experiences put me to sleep in double quick time. At the crack of dawn I was off again, had a shave and a haircut, hired a first mate's uniform and sat down to breakfast in an obscure cafe at exactly 8.30.

Then my treasured plans for escape suffered a sudden recession. The morning paper, presumably left by somebody before me, was at the end of the form on which I sat. The main words caught my eye—and headlines at that!

UNEMPLOYED SEARCH FOR KNOWLEDGE STEALER

" Dozens of unemployed men and women, together with the police, spent most of last evening and all of last night searching for Henry

Parker, to whose efforts—probably hypnotic—they ascribe their loss of knowledge of how to do their work. Drivers, financiers, bankers, mannequins, waiters and others are all searching in their different fields—the higher ones using influential contacts and the lower ones aiding the police. Where is Henry Parker? He is an enemy of society and must be found! More, he is lunatic! This paper will pay £500 to anybody giving information leading to his apprehension, dead or alive. Henry Parker is about 5 feet 9 inches tall, dark, clean shaven, with vacant light blue eyes. . . . He is offered protection if he will give himself up to the police for susequent medical examination."

The sooner I was aboard the *Mary Lancer* the better I would like it.

I hurried through my breakfast and went off for Pier 8, but before I reached it I halted at the sight of a familiar figure in first mate's uniform talking earnestly to a weather beaten individual whom I judged to be the captain of the dirty tramp boat in the rear. The first mate was Martin Ward, whose papers I had stolen. Evidently I had not obliterated the memory of how to get to the ship from his mind, anyway.

What was more, he had a morning paper in his hand and was slapping it savagely, talking heatedly and saying something about hoping God would come down and swipe him if he wasn't right.

I dared not advance. My seagoing notions evaporated. I felt a lot of metaphorical nets tightening around me. . . . Where the devil was I going to hide from the eyes of those seeking me? I thought fast. In my first mate's uniform I would not be easily recognised anyway. But to whom could I turn? I felt like a murderer on the run.

SUDDENLY I remembered June Cranby. Of course! She would give me some protection: she had said as much. Instantly I swung round, pulling my cap peak well over my eyes, and headed away to the nearest bus stop. Fortunately I got a bus which was almost empty: I was far enough away from the other passengers to stop me absorbing their knowledge anyway. I lifted all the conductor's knowledge, however, and could feel his eyes on me in rank suspicion when I reached my stop. I had to stop the bus myself by ringing the bell: he did not even know where it was.

I could still feel his eyes watching me as I ran down the main street, and so to June Cranby's apartments. Everywhere, it seemed, was suddenly studded with watching eyes.

A maid opened the flat door, looked deeply puzzled as I stole all her secrets, and left her standing with her mouth open as I raced past her. There was June Cranby in the window, having her breakfast, looking rather less forbidding than usual in a loose negligee.

She started to her feet in surprise when she penetrated my naval disguise.

"Mr. Parker!"

"Keep your distance, Miss Cranby!" I insisted, thanking Heaven the room was long enough to prevent me absorbing all her deeper knowledge on top of what I already knew concerning her. "I want help—and quickly. You've seen the morning papers?"

"I know you're on the run, yes," she admitted quietly. "I'm really sorry, Mr. Parker. If only you had taken my advice sooner I could have got you out of the mess. Now you have started something pretty bad."

I suppose we looked odd, seated at opposite ends of the room, calling to each other, while the maid stood in silent bewilderment and glanced at each of us in turn.

"You don't know what's the matter with yourself, do you?" June Cranby asked me briefly.

I shook my head wearily. "Hanged if I do! I wish to God I were normal. . . ."

"You can be, but it will necessitate an operation. You are in the class of people who have x-ray eyesight, bifocal vision, adding machine minds, photographic brains, and so forth. In technical language, your brain is linked up with nerve fibres between the frontal and temporal lobes. The fissure of Sylvius is the one thing which stops an ordinary brain—as yet—from performing instant telepathy and taking knowledge direct from another person's brain. If there is a connection across the fissure of Sylvius, as there must be in your case, desire and realisation happen simultaneously. First it demands an effort—then, like breathing, it becomes automatic and you just cannot help soaking up thought waves. That's what is wrong with you—but a brain operation can save you. The connection across the fissure can be severed. And if you're interested I know just the right man for the job—Dr. Hall Storton, the brain specialist. . . ."

"For which he would want hundreds of pounds, eh?" I asked bitterly. "I just can't do it. . . ."

"But I can," she said quietly. "I can write a whole textbook concerning your brain which would be a best seller in the medical world. I can only do it if you will consent to the operation, so that I can be sure my judgment is correct. I'll make the operation fee fifty times over. Now, what do you say?"

I nodded miserably. "All right, then. Heaven knows how I'll finish up—but I'll try it. . . ."

"Good!" She turned to the bureau and threw over a writing pad and pencil. She said: "Write down in detail all the things that have happened to you. Take your time: you are safe enough here. I'll have a talk with Dr. Storton on the 'phone while you do it."

I took up the pencil and started to write. This manuscript is the sequel.

SWEET MYSTERY OF LIFE

By JOHN RUSSELL FEARN

It should have been a rose — but it grew into something far lovelier. It gave away secrets, too. Only they were unusable

TO IDIOT JAKE the world was peaceful: it was devoid of all worries, tumults and fears. To the intellectuals, Idiot Jake was an object of pity; to the harassed he was a man to be envied. His simple mind did not know the meaning of anxiety.

As long as he could sit on the parapet of the small stone bridge spanning the Bollin Brook he was satisfied. If he had any old paper which he could tear into fragments and toss into the gurgling water below it was to him a close approach to Paradise.

The small English village where he lived with his hard-working widowed mother was serenely sleepy on this autumn Sunday morning. The sunlight gleamed on thatched roofs still damp from departed frosts; smoke curled lazily from crazy little chimneys into a placid blue sky. . . .

And on the bridge over the brook Idiot Jake sat in his patched overalls and tattered panama hat. He was long and spare with a narrow face and cramped shoulders. Only in the receding chin and loosely controlled mouth was the evidence of his mental deficiency to be seen. Surprisingly enough, his eyes were very sharp and very blue.

Absently, he looked into the flowing water coursing below him and wished that he had some paper fragments to throw into it. Somehow, though, it was too much of an effort to go and search for them. . . .

HALF A MILE from the village centre, on its outskirts, indeed, and well screened by dense beech trees, stood the home of Harvey Maxted. Nobody in Bollin village knew exactly how Maxted occupied himself. He seemed too young to be a hermit, too thoroughly sane and genial to be an inventor. So tongues wagged, as they always do in a little hamlet perched on the edge of the world

Actually, Maxted was by no means mysterious. He had quite a good Civil Service post in London, to which he travelled back and forth every day. If he chose to live in the quaint old house bequeathed to him by his parents it was entirely his own affair; and if he had decided to live alone except for a fifty-year-old manservant named Belling, that, too, was nobody's business but his own.

He did it for a reason, of course—to have a quiet spot where he could pursue botanical experiments unhindered. Flowers, products of the most brilliant grafting processes, bloomed in every part of the great conservatories attached to the house. Even an old glass-walled, glass-roofed annex which had once been his artist father's studio had now been con-

verted into a horticulturist's paradise, and apart from the flowers, it also boasted all manner of technical apparatus.

Harvey Maxted, thirty-eight, with plenty of money and a keen investigative brain, had one ambition—to produce that much sought after botanical miracle—a jet black rose.

On this particular Sunday morning he stood before a framed area of soil and fertiliser set directly in the rays of the hot September sun streaming through the glass wall. His young good-looking face was tense with effort. In some odd way his strong, masculine figure seemed out of keeping amidst the exquisite botanical creations looming all around him.

Going down on his knees he went to work steadily in the special area, putting a slender cutting deep in the prepared soil and pressing down with his thumbs all around it. For half an hour he stayed at his task, then, thankful for relief from the intense heat of the window, he left the conservatory and wandered into the house, meditating as he went.

Belling, his servant and confidant, was crossing the hall at the same time.

"Do you think you'll be successful this time, sir?" he enquired, pausing.

Harvey Maxted smiled ruefully. "All I can say is that I ought to be—but with eighteen failures in trying to produce Erebus, the black rose, I'm losing some of my confidence. In fact, I'm probably crazy to try it anyway. Pride, Belling—that is what it amounts to. I want to feel that I am able to accomplish the impossible!"

"And you will, sir!" the older man declared, nodding his grey head reassuringly. "You see if you don't."

"Maybe you're right. . . ." Maxted reflected for a moment, then added: "I'm going out for an hour or two. See that the conservatory doors are kept locked."

"You can rely on it, sir."

IT WAS late evening when Maxted returned home. He ate a late dinner leisurely, read for an hour, then went into the conservatory annex for a final look at his rose clipping before retiring. But the moment he reached that frame of soil and fertiliser he stopped in dismay.

The cutting had withered completely, lay limp and yellow, with every trace of life drained out of it! For a moment or two Maxted could not believe it—then he twirled round and shouted angrily for Belling. Within a moment or two the elderly manservant came hurrying in.

"Something the matter, sir?" he asked in surprise.

"I'll say there is! Did you follow out my instructions and keep these doors locked while I was away?"

"But of course I did, sir." Belling was genuinely distressed. "I know how valuable everything is in here."

"You didn't open any of the windows or ventilators from the outside?" Maxted broke off and grinned apologetically, patted the man's arm. "Sorry, Belling—that was unfair of me. But it's damned strange for that cutting to die like that! It means the end of twelve months' careful grafting. . . ."

Belling considered for a moment. "Perhaps the heat, sir?"

"Not in this case: the heat was an essential part of the experiment. . . ." Maxted leaned over the frame and lifted the dead cutting between finger and thumb. "Just as though some other plant had claimed the soil and taken the nature out of it," he muttered. "In the same way that cultivated plants have a struggle to live near strong trees."

There was a puzzled silence for a moment or two, then Maxted stood straight again and sighed heavily.

"I simply don't understand it, that's all. I know this soil to be chemically pure. . . . I'll have to sleep on the problem, Belling, and when I come home from town to-morrow night I'll take a careful look at this soil."

All next day as he pursued his normal occupation in the City Maxted could not help himself thinking about his dead rose cutting. Even a keen gardener might have been baffled by the occurrence, but with Harvey Maxted it was something much more. He was a botanical scientist, understanding mysteries of the plant world not even known in the ordinary way. . . . Yes, something was decidedly wrong, and nothing else but an analysis of the soil could show what it was.

Maxted wasted no time in getting home that evening and even less time on a meal. Then he unlocked the research conservatory and hurried in, switching on the powerful floodlamps.

The rose cutting had shrivelled now into a mere piece of brown stick, but, in its place something *else* was showing, just peeping above the rich black soil. Maxted stared at it fixedly. It looked just like the smooth, fleshy head of a toadstool, perhaps an inch across, yet it was more bulbous.

Very cautiously he felt it and, to his amazement, it jerked away slightly from his touch, as though with nervous reflex action.

"What the devil——!" Maxted was dumbfounded for a moment, then he swung round and bawled, "Belling! Belling—come here!"

Belling came, his tired face troubled. In a moment he assessed the incredulity on Maxted's face.

"Something gone wrong, sir?" he asked anxiously.

"I'll be damned if I know—unless it is that I've worked so long among these plants I've started seeing things——. Take a look at that thing where the rose cutting was. Tell me what you think it is. It—it recoils like the head of a tortoise when you touch it!"

Belling's lined mouth gaped for a moment as he realised the immense implication behind the statement. Then he stretched out a bony finger and tapped the fleshy looking nodule. Again it jerked and the soil around it shifted infinitesimally.

"Great God!" he whispered, his eyes wide. "It's alive, sir—definitely alive. But what *is* it?"

"I don't know," Maxted confessed worriedly. "I wanted to produce a rare specimen and it looks as though I've done it!"

HIS first shock over, Belling's maturity came to his aid. Stooping, he looked at the nodule intently in the bright light. Presently he glanced up with the oddest expression.

"I think we should examine this under the microscope, sir," he said. "Silly though it may sound, I believe I can see the outline of a—a *face!*"

"A what!" Maxted ejaculated, startled. "Hang it all, man——"

"The microscope should settle the argument, sir."

Maxted rubbed the back of his head bemusedly, then he turned and went over to the bench. Bringing back the heavy binocular microscope, he succeeded finally in balancing it so that he could train the lenses directly on the object in the frame.

Wondering vaguely what he would see, he adjusted the eye pieces. Inwardly, he was prepared for the unusual, the fantastic—for anything indeed except the monstrous impossibility of what he *did* see.

For there was a face!

Belling had spoken the truth, and under the powerful lenses and brilliant light everything was in pin-sharp detail. The rounded nodule had now become a completely hairless head. Underneath it were perfectly chiselled features—a long straight nose, tightly closed lips and round chin. The eyelids were lowered at the moment, giving the face a masklike aspect of dead serenity.

"Well, sir?"

Belling's eager voice compelled Maxted to drag his gaze from the fascinating vision. He motioned helplessly to the microscope and Belling peered long and hard. When at last he withdrew his eyes he and Maxted were two men facing the unbelievable.

"A plant—shaped like a human being—growing in soil. . . ."

Maxted uttered the words in jerks. "It's utterly without precedent, either in botany or biology. There has to be a reason for this, Belling, something to make us realise that we are not insane!"

"We can't both be insane, sir."

"No—I suppose not. This—it. Is it male or female?"

"Can't tell very well, sir . . . yet."

They looked again at the nodule and it seemed to both of them that there was a constant suggestion of growth about it. It was enlarging even as they watched.

"Belling. . . ." Maxted gripped his servant's arm tightly, his face drawn with the effort of trying to understand. "Belling, we've stumbled on something infinitely more amazing than a black rose! We've got to watch what happens. Best thing we can do is stay in here and sleep in turns."

"Yes, sir," Belling agreed excitedly. "Indeed yes!"

The decision arrived at, they drew up chairs and then seated themselves where they could watch the enigma in the frame. . . . The fact remained that the thing was certainly growing. . . . But into *what?*

MAXTED and Belling soon discovered that their vigil was not to be a matter of hours, or even of days—but three weeks. During this period the conservatory was kept electrically at the same high temperature as on the morning when the rose cutting had been planted. When he had to be absent, at his Civil Service work in London, Maxted held down his emotions as much as possible—but all the time his thoughts were carrying the remembrance of what he had seen in the conservatory so far.

Then, the moment time permitted, he was rushing homeward again, bolted a meal while Belling related the day's progress; then they went together to survey the miracle's advancement.

The former nodule in the experimental frame had now become an obviously human creature, standing alone in the special bed of soil and surrounded by plants which screened any chance draught. The sex was definitely female, down to the waist. From this point, however, the trunk of the body branched off into a myriad grey filigrees which, in the fashion of nerves, trailed along and sank into the soil.

A woman, yes—or half a woman—her nakedness concealed by an Oriental dressing gown as a concession to convention. A woman, yes, indescribably magnetic, with her now opened enormous green eyes and masses of Albino-blonde hair on the formerly bald scalp. A woman who thrived on fertilisers, humanly poisonous material, and crushed bone residue; a woman the pupils of whose eyes contracted and expanded with startling rapidity at the least variation of light.

Mysterious! Incredible!

So far the woman had made no attempt to communicate. In fact, no sound whatever had escaped her. She seemed able to take nourishment either by the mouth or through the weird mass of sensory nerves trailing from her like roots. At other times her eyes were closed and her body relaxed as though she were sleeping.

"Have you any theories, sir, as to what happened to cause this?" Belling asked when they had finished their latest survey.

"One—just one," Maxted breathed. "It can explain it, but it is so incredible I hardly believe it myself. . . . Do you know Arrhenius' theory?"

Belling reflected. He had a good smattering of general knowledge.

"You mean the one about him believing that life came to Earth through indestructible spores surviving the cold of space and then germinating here?"

"That's the one. . . ." Maxted mopped his streaming face and glanced at the thermometer. It stood at 120°F. "It may be possible," he went on, "that somehow a wandering spore was in the soil when I planted that rose cutting. The cutting died because of the strength of the germinating spore drawing all the nature out of the soil. In this conservatory here we must have accidentally reproduced all the conditions necessary to germinate the spore. . . ."

Maxted looked at the silent woman-plant long and earnestly as she slept, head drooping on her breast.

"Yes, I'm sure I'm right," he resumed. "Life on any other world would be vastly different from ours. This half-woman must belong to a world where intelligent life takes on the form of a plant. A hot, burning world—— Where, Belling? What miracle have we come upon?"

To this there was no immediate answer. Both men kept unceasing watch on the astounding creation in the nights and days which followed. . . .

SHE grew no taller, but there was greater development in the shoulders as time passed. Once even she seemed ill and wilting, but a saturation of the soil with water and phosphates revived her.

During this period she remained practically motionless, her eyes studying the conservatory intently—or else the two men as they surveyed her. It was as though she were trying to determine the nature of her surroundings. When she moved at all it comprised a sinuous writhing of her well rounded arms, as though she yearned to stretch herself. . . .

Then one morning, when the autumn sun was streaming through the great windows, she made the first sound. It began at about the pitch of a soprano's high C and then sailed up effortlessly through two octaves in the purest bell-like clearness it had ever been Belling's good luck to hear. Immediately he rushed out for Maxted, who was sleeping after his night's watch.

"She's singing, sir!" Belling shouted, as he blundered into the bedroom.

Maxted listened drowsily to the silver purity of those notes, then he hurried out of bed and dragged on some clothes. . . . The astounding woman was singing with the joyous abandon of a nightingale when they burst in upon her. In fact, their entry was perhaps too sudden, for she stopped abruptly.

"Shut the door!" Maxted ordered. "We can't risk any cold air in here. . . ."

He went over to the woman slowly, stared into her huge green eyes. The pupils, so abysmally wide in artificial light, were now contracted to pin points in the glare of sunshine, leaving great emerald-coloured irises.

"Who are you?" Maxted asked in an awed voice, repeating a question he had asked dozens of times already. "How did you ever get here?"

The eyes, like those of a tigress, stared back at him hypnotically. He realised that such delicately constructed orbs were intended for a planet of alternate glare and total dark. . . . Venus? Blinding sun for 720 hours; moonless night for a like period. A world of titanic vegetation perhaps—of such people as this . . . ?

Maxted gave himself a little shake and turned his gaze away by sheer physical effort. Belling was beside him, watching and wondering.

"Have you—a language?" Belling asked urgently.

The woman gestured with two copper-coloured arms, and somehow it revealed that she did not understand. Then from her cherry red mouth, with its oddly pointed teeth, came a stream of sing-song notes in that breathtaking purity of tone.

"Speech, sir!" Belling insisted urgently, clutching Maxted's arm. "That's what it is. She's trying to talk to us."

"Yes. . . ." Maxted listened to her in bewildered attention. "Yes—speech."

Even so it was but the commencement of weeks of hard work to come, of the exchange of words. But gradually the woman seemed to understand what was meant. By means of pantomime and untiring patience, Maxted struggled to bridge the gap between species. In the intervals between these spells of study the woman either sang gloriously or slept. . . . Those times when he had to be away on business were the hardest for Maxted, but somehow he got through it.

INEVITABLY, though, the conservatory's secret did not remain within those hot glass walls. Seated on the bridge parapet one morning, tearing up a piece of paper and watching the strips flutter into the brook below, was Idiot Jake. He heard a voice of uncommon range and clarity floating from somewhere beyond the village, born on the south wind.

Its beauteous harmony attracted him, drew him irresistibly

He traced it finally to the conservatory, where a slightly open ventilator permitted the sound to come forth. Idiot Jake could see quite clearly through the plain glass windows—and he started a rumour which went through the clannish, scandal-loving community of the village with seven league boots.

Harvey Maxted, the mystery man, the apparent misogamist, had got an ash-blonde woman living with him! Been no announcement of a marriage or anything, either! Jake himself had seen her, both in the day and at night. She always sat in that little outbuilt conservatory, singing or talking and dressed in a sort of Oriental costume.

That she was only half a woman was not apparent to the prying busybodies of Bollin. The

shrubs surrounding the special soil bed hid the filigree of nervous tendrils which began at the waistline. From outside it looked as though she were sitting down among the plants.

In groups, by night, the denizens of the village crept into the grounds of the house and looked through the unscreened windows on to the scene within. They said it was not even decent and that Maxted ought to be locked up for it, and his servant with him. . . . Then, gradually, they tired of their scandal and ceased to bother.

All except Idiot Jake. Though he no longer risked detection by hiding in the grounds in the daylight, he was certainly there every night, his crafty pale blue eyes watching over the thick bushes, his warped brain considering all manner of speculations about the terribly lovely woman who either sat and gestured or else sang with a richness which stirred Idiot Jake to the depths.

MAXTED AND BELLING, absorbed in their efforts to communicate with the plant-woman, never even gave eavesdropping a thought. That the conservatory had no window shades they knew full well, but since it and the house were in the midst of grounds the possibility of being overlooked never occurred to them.

Besides, they were making good progress in language exchange now. The woman was able to express herself with comparative fluency, and where she stumbled the gap could always be filled in. Certainly the time had come, in Maxted's opinion, for a determined effort to solve the mystery.

"Just who are you?" he asked the woman, seated on one side of the soil bed and Belling on the other.

"I come from the moon of the second planet," the woman's dulcet voice replied, and she added an arm gesticulation.

"Moon of the second planet?" Maxted repeated, frowning. "You mean the moon of Venus? But it hasn't one!"

"Not now," the woman agreed, then she hesitated as she chose her words. Slowly, with many pauses, she began to tell her story. "My name is Cia. I lived, ages ago, upon the satellite of the world you have called Venus. Upon this satellite, as upon the parent world, there existed—and still does on the parent world—a race of beings like me. I am not either male or female, as you would call it, but both. . . ."

"You mean hermaphrodite?" Maxted asked sharply.

"If you call two sexes in one that—yes. Many of your Earth plants have that quality and some of your animals and birds. New plants—new living beings in our case—are born simply by the casting of seed. Under the influence of rich soil it grows and can choose its own sex as far as appearance is concerned. Nature has cursed our race by making us plantlike and immobile, but as a compensation she has given us vast intelligence. Whether it be a jest of Nature to give great intellect to beings who cannot move from the spot where they are born I do not know. . . ."

Maxted looked sharply at the absorbed Belling across the soil bed, then the woman resumed haltingly.

"This, though, I do know. Life—our life—became so profuse on our moon, and the myriad roots became so deep and destructive, that it finally smashed the satellite in pieces, just like some of your climbing plants tear down a wall. We were aware in advance of what was happening and so contracted ourselves back into spore form——"

"How could that be done?" Belling asked.

"I've heard of certain plants, and even animals, which can contract themselves," Maxted answered. "Take, for instance, certain sea squirts which spend the winter in the form of small white masses in which the organs of the normal animal are quite absent. In the spring they reverse the process and grow up again. Sea anemones do the same thing if starved of nutriment. So do flat worms. But usually this contraction business applies only to the invertebrates. You, Cia, appear to have a backbone."

"Not in the sense you know it," she answered. "It is hard tissue, not solid bone."

"That would explain your ability to shrink then," Maxted admitted. "As for your male-female unity, we call it parthenogenesis."

"This power to contract does not destroy our intelligence," the woman resumed, "because in a sense we are still alive. When the satellite broke up we were, of course, cast adrift into space. Myriads of us must have drifted down on to the parent world, drawn by the gravity, to take root and flourish anew. In my case, I can only think that cosmic tides wafted me across the infinite to this world where I have lain, in a form of suspended animation, for untold ages. Then you produced conditions here identical to those on my former world and I came to life. My effort to understand explains why I took so long to communicate. Our ability to what you call 'sing' comes from the need of calling to each other over great distances. . . ."

There was a silence and Maxted drew a deep breath. He looked at the woman from a far off world, and then at Belling; but before he could speak his attention was caught by something outside one of the huge windows.

A face was looking into the conservatory—a thin, fox-like face topped by a battered panama hat. The licentious blue eyes of Idiot Jake were watching every detail.

"By God!" Maxted breathed angrily, jumping up. "I'll show him. It's that damned yokel out of the village——"

He strode to the door and opened it, closing it quickly again to prevent any drastic change of air. In a few quick strides he was out through the back entrance into the grounds. Evidently Idiot Jake had

guessed what was intended, for he had just commenced to slink away into the bushes. In one dive Maxted was upon him, whirling him round with a tight grip on the collar of his shabby coat.

"Just a minute, Jake! What are you doing here?"

"Nothin' mister. . . ." Jake cringed and averted his face. "I just wanted to see the pretty singer. . . . You can't hit me for that!"

Maxted tightened his lips for a moment.

"The pretty singer, eh? Is that what you have been telling everybody in the village? How often have you been here?"

"Never before," Jake lied emphatically, and Maxted gave him a shove.

"All right—you get back home before I break your neck. And if I ever find you on my property again I'll hand you over to the police. Go on—get moving!"

Jake touched the brim of his battered panama and grinned vacantly, then he went loping off amidst the bushes.

MAXTED came back into the conservatory with a troubled frown.

"I don't like it," he confessed to Belling when he had briefly recounted what had happened. "That imbecile is likely to spread all kinds of idiotic tales—granting even that he hasn't done so already."

"Doesn't seem to be much we can do, sir," Belling reflected. "The damage, if any, is done already."

Maxted nodded regretfully, then, with a shrug which seemed to indicate that he had decided to drop the matter he turned to look again at Cia. She was watching him intently.

"This meeting between Earth and Venus—or at any rate Venus' moon—is about the most marvellous thing that ever happened," he said. "But wonderful though it is, it is incomplete in itself. We are just individuals representing our respective species. There will have to be a way found for space to be bridged and our two worlds to have exchange of visits. . . . You understand what I mean, Cia?"

"I understand," she assented.

"Good! Tell me, with all the high intelligence your race possesses, have you any ideas on space travel?"

"Yes, although much is theory. Being immobile we have no use for space travel, but handed down in the knowledge of our race is the story of a ship from space which crashed upon our world. From the few survivors—they were somewhat similar to your race, and our climate suited them—we learned much about the construction and working of their machine."

Maxted stroked his chin and frowned.

"Strange that Earth has never had visitors from another planet. I wonder—could these visitors of yours have come from our Universe—Mars perhaps?"

"No. According to our knowledge, they came from outer space, and only chance directed them to us. Most of the travellers were killed when the ship crashed—the few survivors were unable to repair the damage and spent the rest of their lives living amongst us. Their knowledge expanded our concepts tremendously."

There was silence for a while, while Maxted paced slowly up and down the conservatory; then Cia resumed.

"We of Venus need a race like yours to free us from bondage. We are intellectual giants chained down by Nature. None of our mighty ideas can bear fruit until we have somebody with us who can move about and so help us. I am prepared to give you the secrets of spaceship design and atomic power, which you will need for propulsion—if you in turn will pledge yourselves to work side by side with us to free us from enslavement."

Maxted was silent, overawed by the immensity of the proposition. He reflected for quite a time, watched anxiously by Belling and the woman, before he made up his mind.

"I cannot, of course, speak for my entire race, Cia; it would take years to make everybody understand what is happening here, and even then there would be no guarantee of others agreeing with my viewpoint that we should help you and your people. But, speaking for myself and the many scientists who for years have been crying out for a chance like this, I am willing to co-operate. Once the thing is done collusion between our worlds is inevitable."

"Very well," the woman said. "I realise that you cannot convince your race without proof, so I shall make the secrets your property."

"Now?" Maxted questioned eagerly.

"No, to-morrow night. I must have time to consider the relative differences between your mathematics and mine. For to-night I prefer to be left alone."

"All right," Maxted assented. "But one or other of us will remain on guard outside. I don't feel any too happy after that village idiot has been prowling about. . . ."

CONTRARY to Maxted's fears, however, Idiot Jake did not present himself again during the night, or during the next day—Sunday. And by the time evening came both men were too absorbed in the Venusian plant-woman's slow explanation of profound secrets to give any thought to Idiot Jake.

For two hours Cia talked and gave mathematical formulæ, which Maxted wrote down laboriously in his notebook. In that two hours he learned, through figures anyway, the secrets of new metals and the many different essentials necessary in a ship designed to cross space. He learned how atomic force could be extracted and controlled with complete safety and the calculations necessary for the trajectory across space to Venus. These and many more Cia gave him, until his head began to ache with the thoughts being instilled inside it.

Yes, upon those sheets of paper which Maxted finally set aside on the bench were secrets which could lay the foundations of an interplanetary empire.

Then, suddenly, just as the long effort to understand each other was over, there was a violent explosive crack from one of the windows. A heavy piece of tree branch came hurtling inwards in a shower of glass.

"What the devil!" Maxted swung round angrily and for a moment there was a vision of Idiot Jake's vindictively grinning face. Then he dashed out of sight and vanished in the darkness of the grounds.

Maxted took three swift strides towards the shattered window, only to pause as Cia gave a desperate, despairing cry and Belling shouted in horror.

Something was happening to the plant-woman. Her head was drooping, her face suffused with an expression of indescribable anguish. Her soft copper-tinted flesh was turning grey and forming into dry and dusty scales.

"It's the cold, sir!" Belling shouted, seizing Maxted's arm. "It's killing her! The temperature's gone down——"

Maxted made a slow, stupid movement, unable to decide what he ought to do. In any case, it was too late now. The night air streaming into the conservatory was charged with frost and under its withering breath the strange being of a superheated world wilted until she looked as if she had been soaked in liquid air. She began to take on a brittle, crystallised aspect.

"Cia!" Maxted gasped, clutching her hand, then he stared in horror as it snapped off in his grip like a rotten branch.

"She's dead, sir," Belling whispered, white-faced. "She's as brittle as a carrot——"

He paused and both he and Maxted swung round as a police officer came striding in through the shattered window, followed by a surging mass of the village populace and—in the background—the drooling Idiot Jake.

"Now, sir!" Police Constable Adams looked round the conservatory curiously, then at the frozen grey image which had been a woman. "Now, sir, what's all this 'ere about you 'aving a woman in 'ere? Always sat in the same place? I've heard all about it."

"From that idiot, Jake, eh?" Maxted asked bitterly. "Or from these villagers?" and he looked sourly at them as they formed in a curious semi-circle.

"I 'eard of a woman being ill-treated in 'ere, sir," P.C. Adams said. "I considered it my duty to h'investigate."

"Sheer imagination, constable, on the part of Jake," Maxted said, trying hard to keep his temper. "I found him on my property last night and kicked him out. To-night he smashes a window for revenge and spreads a trumped-up tale. And you've no authority to break in on me like this, either!"

"Sorry, sir." Adams began to look uncomfortable. "I just thought I'd better——"

"We all saw that woman!" one of the villagers piped up. "An' we heard her voice, too. She were a fine singer, she were."

Maxted gave a weary smile.

"The voice, let me assure you, was from an instrument I am working upon. As for the woman—well, can't a man fashion a statue to place among his flowers? Look for yourselves!"

He pointed to the dead, granite-like Cia. P.C. Adams looked at her, touched her hard shoulders, brooded over the solidly frozen tendrils in the soil as though he wondered what they were—then he put his notebook away and touched his helmet.

"Sorry, sir; been a mistake somewhere. I'll say good-night. Outside, you people! Outside!"

When at last they had all gone Maxted relaxed and rubbed his forehead.

"We might have got in a nasty mess, Belling. We never thought of conventions. . . Poor Cia! Obviously she froze to death before she had a chance to adapt herself into spore form or protect herself against the cold. Damn Idiot Jake! Damn him!"

"At least we have the secrets, sir," Belling said. "Over on the bench there is our passport to Venus——"

He stopped dead. Maxted caught his look of consternation and gazed as well. There was no sign of papers or notebook anywhere.

THE FOLLOWING morning it was calm and sunny. Two distracted men had searched all night and failed to find the secrets that could link two worlds.

On the bridge over the Bollin Brook Idiot Jake sat and hummed to himself, a bundle of papers in each tattered pocket. As he watched the torn strips flutter down and float away the world seemed to him to be laughing. Perhaps it was—ironically.

THE THREE PYLONS

By WILLIAM F. TEMPLE

The Pylons pointed the way to—something. When Rodan solved the problem he inadvertently changed the course of history

I.

THIS IS THE STORY of an island which was once a needle-point in the infinite blue wastes of the Pacific, and it had its beginnings and its end before the Phœnicians came to Britain. How much is story and how much history can be nothing but conjecture. It is a legend which is known in all the villages along the upper reaches of the Yellow River.

It is part of the legend that it is true, an account brought eventually to China by a wandering fisherman, who happened to be far out to sea in pursuit of a shoal when volcanic eruption crumpled the ocean bed five miles beneath his keel and caused the lands of Argot and Mag to settle and vanish beneath the waves as if they had never been. Which, perhaps, they had not.

Whoever else outlived that disaster did not survive the tempest that followed it, or if they did there is no record of them. A violent westerly gale carried the fisherman in his small craft a thousand miles or more in two days and flung him on an inhabited outpost of an archipelago in the China Seas. From which he made his way by sundry voyages over a period of ten years to the Chinese mainland, missing Japan altogether.

He was the first and last man (perhaps) of the Two Kingdoms ever to learn that Argot and Mag were not the whole world.

Yet I have doubts of this fisherman. True, he was supposed to have been at one time a foot soldier in the Army of Argot, and therefore would have witnessed the last act of the drama of the Three Pylons, played as it was before an audience of wondering thousands. But how could he have known of things so few people knew, and those people not of his circle—the contents of the Messages, for example?

Possibly it is Chinese embroidery.

But I suspect that the real originator of this tale was none other than Benevo himself, Benevo the mysterious, the all-wise, come by great chance and wonder to the land of the people so happily akin to his philosophy. Benevo and all knowledge of him must, however, be a faded and illegible page in Chinese history, for nought remains of him but this tale.

It begins in this fashion:

One evening, as the sun sank towards the western sea and enveloped it in glittering redness as a portent of its coming to rest, twelve men and a captain, all the King's Own Guard, marched from a main door of the Palace of Argot. Straight down the avenue of palms they marched, their captain two paces ahead, leading them into the sunset.

Of a sudden they right-wheeled with precision, and so by a side path into a garden of seclusion.

There, on a lawn, they halted, left turned and stood in rank. The captain ordered them to open ranks.

He addressed them.

"Men," he said, "this is our last parade in this country. You have been good soldiers. You have been lazy, you have shirked small things, you have not always been clean. But you have never failed to perform the real tasks that have been demanded of you. I can trust you to continue to do so in the new life which opens up before us. Till we meet once more! Draw!"

The thin, short shriek of steel brushing steel as their swords were drawn from their scabbards. They saluted and the captain returned their salute.

"On guard!" the captain commanded.

Twelve swords thrust forward and up, a concord of simultaneous movements whose perfection told of long, long hours of drill and effort. In his own time the captain followed the movement.

And so they all stood, immobile.

The garden lay about them in loveliness in the evening light. Nature was given every chance in the royal garden. Flowering creepers climbed the trees and lost themselves in the higher greenery or arched across loggias and covered carved pillars with a more fantastic tracery of their own. The bushes were heavy with ripe fruit and the little berry plants thrust their bright offerings through every aperture they could find. The orchids were thick upon every green wall, things of staring colour like many-hued eyes watching the men in silent curiosity. And growths which had no beauty or fruit, but only ambition, crept and clambered on the backs of their fellows, parasitic and heartless in their all-consuming greed to reach the wonderful sun.

Small, vivid-feathered birds ever swooped and whirred, the midges drifted and swarmed like motes in a sunbeam.

It was a garden of bursting life. And into it came death in a subtle and strange form.

THE SWORD of the third guard from the left in the front rank suddenly wavered and dipped. Then its owner went down with a thump and crash of body and steel equipment, as though he had been pierced by an invisible arrow. He lay face downwards and very still, his fingers yet tight around his sword-grip.

No one even looked at him. No one moved a muscle. The discipline of the King's Own Guard began in childhood.

Silence but for the humming of the flying insects.

Stillness, save for the fluttering missions of the birds.

A man at one end of the rear rank sank gently to his knees, pitched as gently forward. The rigid men heard a sigh and that was all.

Presently two front-rankers reeled and toppled almost together. Another fell singly. And another. And another.

Until twelve dead men sprawled upon the living grass.

For the old King Fero, their lord, had died but a short time since, and it was the custom for the King of Argot's bodyguard in life to follow him into the realm of death and there continue to guard him against whatever dangers may be. All the guard and their captain had quaffed poison but a moment before they marched from the Palace.

The captain now permitted himself to lower his gaze to survey his departed men. He noted with approval that not one of them had loosed his hold upon his sword. A certain fondness crept into his gaze, and then he pulled himself together with a military snap. Again he stared straight in front of him with ice-cold eyes.

But behind those expressionless eyes thoughts moved. He wondered whether his men had already arrived. If they were waiting for him. If the old-new King Fero were impatient of his coming. Or if there were impatience, which is fear, in that supposedly calm world of infinite time. Or if, indeed (blasphemy, this!) there were such a world at all.

The rosy light streaming from behind, over his shoulder, came from the last sunset he would ever see anywhere. For an incredible moment a queer aching desire struggled with discipline for him to turn his head and drink his fill of the glory behind him.

But discipline won. He even gazed across the tops of the bushes to the massive base of the White Pylon (the stone of it was now stained pink-red in that light) and forbore to look up at the dizzy summit, a hundred times a man's height above him, even though curiosity burned in him yet again in those last moments.

Why had King Fero built it? What was the answer to the riddle of the White Pylon?

The pain of death smote him in the middle of this old puzzlement. The wave of it sprang suddenly from the heart, paralysed his throat and mouth muscles. Involuntarily, he flung his hand back. He saw the point of the White Pylon dug into the darkening blue of the sky, and then swiftly pink-red and blue merged and became black. He felt himself falling. His last conscious directed thought was to clench his right hand as hard as he could.

So the captain joined his men in death, perhaps in life after death. Not with shame, anyway, for, as was fitting, he had outlasted them, nor had he lost his sword.

The birds dived and curved over the thirteen motionless bodies and cared nothing for them. The eternal midges moved in their golden-winged sphere.

Slowly, slowly, the sun sank.

II.

IN HIS private room at the Palace Rodan, son of Fero and now King by right of succession,

weighed in his hand the flat golden case given to him by his dying father. His pale eyes regarded it from every angle as if their keenness could pierce any chink there might be and see all that was inside without opening it.

Apparently they could not, for: "The key, Benevo, the key," he demanded impatiently.

Rodan was always impatient. The servants of the royal household lived under the constant threat of his boiling urge to get something or go somewhere and the eruptions if there was any delay. He was free and violent with his tongue, his fist and his whip.

The ladies of the Court were scared of him, too, but a thrill went with the scare. He was tall, big boned, with strikingly wide shoulders, and his hair was of pure gold, sweeping back in a disordered mane. The hair of his head might receive scant attention, but he was careful to keep all trace of hair from his lips and chin. Power stood stark in every line of them: he wanted it to show.

Not particularly for the ladies' benefit. It was to impress "them"—and "them" meant the people—all people, male, female, young, old, clever, stupid, who happened to inhabit this island, which was the world, with him.

Only one man was not impressed. That was Benevo, Advisor to the old King Fero, now automatically filling the same office for Rodan. An ancient man—how ancient nobody seemed to know. He was bearded and venerable even in Fero's youth, and whence he came and how he rose to power only the late King knew. Possibly.

Just now he was endeavouring, in his slow-moving way, to unfasten a small silver key from its catch on the thin gold chain which he wore fairly tightly around his neck. For that was the way Fero had enjoined him to carry it. It caught obstinately.

"My esteemed Benevo," said Rodan, "the best way is always the shortest way."

His strong fingers gripped the thin chain. One quick jerk and the links pulled out and fell apart and left an end in either palm. Rodan lifted the chain and key away.

"You see, just a little force, a little energy applied with determination in the right place will accomplish in a moment what an hour of patient fumbling will not," he said in the ironic tone habitual with him.

Ironic humour was the only kind he understood. That and fretting impatience, cold cruelty, contempt, a hunting instinct, a desire for conquest, a fighting rage and a quality of curiosity made up the whole character of Rodan. Love, worship, tolerance, generosity or real humour had never entered into it and never would.

"But, Sire, the chain cannot be worn again," pointed out Benevo gently.

"There is no need for it to be: its use is finished," said Rodan logically enough.

He was fitting the key in the lock as he spoke and now he turned it and lifted the lid. Inside the case was only a dark metal plate, deeply engraved with letters.

"What is this?" he asked, and carried it over to the window to examine it by the fading light of day.

It was the first of the Messages, and it read:

To my son, Rodan.

Greetings, new King of Argot!

I am departed to rule in another land, and I leave you as heritage this throne—and a Mystery! Truly I do not know all of this Mystery myself. I set it, indeed, detail by detail as the stars directed in the horoscope Oelin cast for me upon my wish. My wish was this: That I should become Emperor of the World, King of Argot and Mag together. But the path to that greater throne is hard. Hard to build, harder to follow. And the Gods decree that there shall be no other path for he who would conquer.

Before I began even to build, my spirit quailed. I knew I had not the qualities to tread that path. My dream of Lordship of the Two Kingdoms was just a dream—for me. But in you, my son, I perceive the qualities of the true conqueror, and therefore over many years and with much labour I have builded the path for you. That you may gain the prize for our line.

The first necessary step is that you climb to the top of the White Pylon, the Pylon of Life, which stands without the Palace, and learn what is written upon the top thereof. That will place your feet firmly on the beginning of the road.

A word of warning. Trust not in Benevo. I have over-trusted him in the past. He will weaken you with his words of seeming wisdom, as he weakened me, and sow doubt over your enterprise.

Trust rather in Oelin. It is written in the stars that he is to play a great part in this adventure. Seek help, therefore, in his house.

And now—climb, my son, and my hopes climb with you!

Your father,

FERO.

RODAN'S thick brows came together as he studied this. He shot an upward look from beneath them at Benevo, that imperturbable man with the snow-white beard, the dreamy dark eyes and the incredibly smooth brow.

"Have you read this?" he asked abruptly.

"No, Sire. Your father gave me the key, that is all. The case he kept himself: I have not seen it until now."

"Read, then," said Rodan, and passed the inscribed plate to the old man.

Benevo read it without change of expression.

"You will mark the reference to yourself," said Rodan, all irony. "Simply because I have never trusted you, I let you see it. My father was a weak man. His warning is unnecessary. As unnecessary

as any 'words of seeming wisdom' will be from you. Nobody moulds the thoughts of Rodan but Rodan."

"If my counsel is not to be heeded, Sire, then it would seem that my position of King's Advisor is redundant. May I have your permission to resign?"

"No, you may not. Beside myself, you are the only passably intelligent man in this kingdom of fools. Again, it is my ambition to prove to you by my actions that your attitude of sweet reasonableness is a wordy emptiness, a negative, a sheer waste of our limited time of life."

"Time is not limited except to those who place their own limits to it."

"Nay, Benevo, draw me not into argument now. I say my time is limited by the dying light of this day. I have a task to do ere it is gone."

"The funeral——"

"You will lead the funeral procession of my father in my absence. Argue not. I am aware that I am the first to break the aged custom. I will break many customs ere my reign is ended. Go now. See to it."

"Very good, Sire."

Benevo bowed and left. In Argot there was small delay in preparing men for burial after their death. Possibly because some held to the belief that a spirit could not leave the body for the next world until that body lay under earth. More possibly because Argot was a hot country. It was the practice for the eldest son (Rodan was an only son) to head the procession to the burial ground. Now all Benevo's smooth diplomacy was needed to appease the shocked sense of propriety of the gathered and waiting nobles by this uncaring departure from custom by Rodan.

Rodan, meanwhile, pausing only to get his strong hunting lariat, had paced swiftly out to the base of the White Pylon, the Pylon of Life.

For a moment he stood there gazing up at the prodigious height of it. It was a four-sided erection of solid white stone, tapering as its sides rose until the last stretch of it before the summit appeared as thin as a twig. A solitary mare's tail of cirrus cloud lay in the sky, and the death-light of the sun soaked it red. The narrow end of it lay exactly over the pinnacle of the pylon, so that, looking up from below, it seemed that the pylon flew a long, flaring pennon of crimson.

But the fancy that occurred to Rodan was that the great upthrusting blade of the pylon had ripped a bleeding wound in the belly of the sky, and the point of it had not yet been withdrawn from that bloody gash.

Then he put fancies aside and concentrated on the task in hand.

Up the height of one side of the pylon had been driven, exactly one above the other and some eight or nine feet apart, a series of thin metal bars, perhaps a yard long, projecting at right-angles from the stone, so that one end of each bar was embedded in stone and the other free in the empty air. This fantastically wide-runged ladder ran all the way to the summit, but its highest bars could not be distinguished one from another by reason of their distance.

The lowest bar, however, was all of thirty feet from the ground.

Rodan took a few paces back, measuring this bottom rung with his eye. Then he swung the noose of his lariat around his head and let it fly. The noose soared, passed neatly over the end of the bar and settled, to become a tight knot as Rodan jerked the rope downward.

He climbed the lariat hand over hand and swung himself easily on to the bar. There he sat while he pulled up the lariat, coiled it and hung it from his waist-belt.

Now he stood up on the bar, on his toes, steadying himself with one hand against the wall of the pylon. That in itself was no mean balancing feat, for the bar was very narrow and indeed bending slightly beneath his weight.

He reached upwards towards the next bar. His fingers were a long way below it. He did not hesitate. He bent his knees and leapt straight upwards, thrusting with his toes as hard as he could. His ranging fingers just made the bar, closed upon it. For a moment he swayed at arm's length. Then, with a lithe acrobatic motion, he swung himself up into a sitting position on the bar.

Once more he stood and reached, leapt and swung.

And again the need to balance, judge, leap, swing, rest. . . .

Until, a score of bars up, he was forced to rest for a long time.

The sea had claimed the body of the sun now and the cloud overhead had drifted apart and lost its glory. The sky was darkest of blues. The faint pin-point of Venus was appearing, to stand sentinel over the burying-place of the sun.

And suddenly, from the Palace below, already a small thing and blurred in the gloom that lay upon the ground, issued a string of little lights, tiny flames, that wound like the path of a snake towards the south. They were the torches of the funeral procession now setting out with Benevo at its head.

RODAN watched their progress dispassionately for a little while, then stood erect on his bar and judged his leap to the next.

He was already at a height where an error or a failing meant sudden and certain death.

He leapt, successfully.

Again, and again.

When he was as high again he was forced to rest once more. His breathing was stertorous, the muscles of his arms and thighs ached almost intolerably. It was a harder and longer business than he had bargained for. Even now he had lost his race against the light. But he had no thought of delaying therefore. His mental discipline was such

that no notion entered his mind that he should not do what he had set himself to do in the shortest possible time.

Presently he stood up. The next rung above him was no more than a narrow black line ruled across the stars, now studding the sky in thousands. With such a perspective, it was difficult to judge its distance. Nevertheless, each bar had so far been exactly the same and uniform distance from its neighbour, and he had fallen into a rhythm of action. He put his faith in this rhythm and leapt again and was rewarded—his fingers encountered the bar just where it should be.

And so upwards against growing weariness, but with no lessening of determination. The chin still thrust, the mouth had not slackened.

Until at last, sitting astride a bar, his hand could feel no wall at his side, only a flat surface very little above the level of the bar. It was the summit.

He crawled on to it. As far as his rough exploratory gropings could give basis for judgment, it was about six feet square. His fingers ran over the smooth surface of it and found what they sought: an inlaid metal plaque. He could feel the roughness of the letters engraved upon it. His fingertips tried to follow their line and read them by touch, but he had to give that up—the letters were too small or his fingers were not sensitive enough. He would not be able to read the second Message until the light of the morning came.

His impatience had netted him nothing but a night of exposure.

For, as is usual in such regions, the nights were very cold after the torrid day. He buttoned his jerkin to his throat as he lay and contracted himself into a sort of ball, with his back to the assailing night wind with its keen edge.

His outlook now was upon the south. He could see the black teeth of the Mag mountains sawing the starry sky. They showed only as a jet silhouette. He could not discern even a glimmer of the frozen snow that perpetually filled their highest crevices. Somewhere up on one of those near-precipitous glaciers was embedded the ice-axe he had carried higher than any man in the world.

But all the many expeditions he had made to those heights had only confirmed the long-held belief in the Kingdom of Argot: that they were insurmountable. One could fight fatigue. One could cling like an insect to almost perpendicular slopes of ice and cut even higher steps in them. But no one could breathe where there was no air to speak of, and the summits of the Mag mountains heaved themselves well above the thinnest atmosphere possible to sustain life and effort.

Argot was surrounded by the sea. But Mag was surrounded by the mountains, a mysterious and inaccessible country behind the unbroken rampart ring, a kingdom within a kingdom. Only one pass there was through the mountains to the inner side of the ring, a narrow, deep fissure in the rocky walls. And that chasm was barred near the entrance by a man-made barrier, a high fortress of stone, built by the Magmen of long ago to seal off their land from any invader. It reached between both walls of the chasm and joined them with a bridge of stone, which could not be attacked from above because the walls of the fissure were sheer and like glass.

The only Magmen the people of Argot had ever seen were the soldiers who manned the fort. And they had seen little of them, for every approach had been met with heavy showers of arrows and javelins.

As the ground immediately before the fort was flat and without cover, no one from the Outer Kingdom had yet managed to reach the wall of the barrier and mass rushes were halted in their tracks. It is doubtful whether they would have effected much had they reached that goal, for the unbroken front of the fort was much too high for any scaling ladder that could be wielded, and the men on the ramparts above them had them wholly at their mercy.

By all known ways of war the Mag Fort was impregnable.

Rodan thought upon this as he gazed at the distant peaks, and then of a sudden his eyes narrowed.

For the Red Light of Mag flickered from somewhere behind those peaks, a small, far glow that yet illuminated part of the shoulder of one upflung mass of rock. He knew it was but a snow reflection he saw, and that the actual hidden source of the Light must be a fire, bright, huge, fiercely hot, like an immense furnace.

Indeed, that was what Rodan believed it to be—a great forge.

The Red Light was seen by the people of Argot comparatively rarely, perhaps twice or thrice in a year, and it lasted from two to three days and nights each time. Their conjectures as to its nature were various.

But from the first Rodan had pronounced it to be a gigantic furnace in which the swordsmiths of Mag forged and tempered every kind of weapon of war, many hundreds at each lighting of the furnace. And, he said, this growing accumulation of armaments could mean only one thing: the Magmen were preparing for the great day when they would burst out of their mountain-ringed stronghold and conquer the Outer Kingdom in one sudden rush of overwhelming power.

He really believed this theory, probably because he wanted to believe it. A Rodan needs an adversary for his life to mean anything. To him life is conflict, life is battle, in the rawest sense.

And thus Rodan, perched like an eagle in its eyrie, stared coldly across the night at the Red Light, which he had never seen so closely before, and muttered: "Work away, you Magmen, work hard! But preparation crumbles before he who strikes first and harder. And it will not be you who strike."

Presently sleep came upon him, despite the cold.

Far out to sea a faint disc of phosphorescence floated in the blackness—a moving shoal of fish. An occasional meteorite made a diamond scratch across the ebony sky. The chill night breeze stirred the sleeper's long hair. The Red Light of Mag flickered and burned like a guttering candle.

III.

RODAN was awake ere the day was. In the grey half-light he scrutinised the plaque and made out the second Message to read thus:

To my son, Rodan.

Well accomplished, my son! You have proved you have the fundamental qualities to tread this road to the end, the qualities of the conqueror: courage, unrelenting determination, endurance. Without those you would have not reached this point.

In all confidence you may step forward now along the next stretch of the way, which lies through the summit of the Second Pylon, the Red Pylon, the Pylon of Blood, which I builded in the remoter wastes of the woodlands below the Mag Mountains.

(Inserted in the text at this point was an engraven map showing in detail the location of the Red Pylon. Rodan's keen visual memory seized upon it and held it with a grip that would never loosen.)

Go then, Emperor that can be, and use your mind as you have used your body.

Your father,

FERO.

He was a little disappointed. Somehow he had expected something more from the Pylon of Life than this (to him) rather pointless test of character. However, he had learned something: that there was another Pylon, and probably another Message upon it which should be all-revealing. The hunt was up.

He stood up and uncoiled his lariat.

He took one last look at the peaks of the Mag Mountains, now illumined by the sunrise (the Red Light was visible now only as a thin pillar of whitish smoke), and then began the perilous descent. His method was to hang the lariat doubled over each bar and slide down the double thickness to the lower bar, there pulling the rope down after him and continuing to repeat the trick.

After much of this wearisome and finally exasperating procedure he at length reached the ground.

Into the Palace he strode, issuing orders right and left. His bath to be prepared at once. His breakfast to be served immediately—now. His horse to be saddled. Two days' food rations to be packed in his saddle-bags.

After a hectic interval, he took the trail south in a cloud of dust.

Benevo, in mid-morning, leading the funeral party back from its all-night pilgrimage, saw the King's white horse and its rider approaching him at breakneck speed. He drew aside and dismounted and prepared to give the King an account of his father's burial.

But Rodan swept by in a swirl of dust, neither slackening pace nor making hail. Along the whole cortege of his nobles he passed, startling their horses by the fury of his passage. On he galloped towards the forests of the south.

Hours later he pulled up his slavering and exhausted horse below a green hill on the border of the forest land. He dismounted to let the beast drink in a brook and rest, and himself drank there. He pulled a handful of fruit from a saddle-bag and stood eating it, feet wide apart, staring up the gentle slope of that unusually vivid green hill.

The hill was the traditional burying place of the kings of Argot. Patterned over its naturally watered slope were a considerable number of white, strictly cubical, blocks. Beneath each block reposed the remains of a past king. Halfway up the slope was a block with freshly turned earth still evident round about it, and Rodan knew that there was laid his father.

He did not trouble even to walk up and inspect the block. He gazed at it incuriously, still chewing.

Suddenly he spat orange pips contemptuously in its direction and made a noise of disgust.

"Ugh! You utter weakling! That you should be *my* father! I wonder that you ever had the strength to beget me. Lie there and rot for ever! Surely no other country but this would tolerate you for king."

He turned his back upon the hill.

Soon he was on his way again, at a more moderate pace, for the way twisted among trees.

It was almost sundown again ere he reached the lip of the valley in the woods wherein was the home of the Red Pylon. He saw nothing of it until he emerged from a thick cluster of over-leaning trees, and suddenly there it was—a great, lone red finger pointing at the heavens. Its redness was not the thin borrowed light of the sinking sun, but inherent in it, a deep crimson of its substance.

It was fully as high as the White Pylon. But there was no ladder of iron rungs thrust into its side. It stood stark, bare, as smooth-sided as ice.

WHEN Rodan came up to it he found those sides were harder than ice, harder than the stone of the White Pylon, harder than anything he had yet known. Obviously it was a new composition of some sort, or stone treated in some wise as to make it imperviously hard.

Was it indeed impervious?

Rodan drew his sword, the best tempered blade in the land and no light one. He took his stance, swung the sword back over his shoulder and brought it down and sideways with all his strength against an edge where two sides of the Pylon met—a viciously powerful blow that would have lopped the sturdiest sapling as though it were a cornstalk.

The resulting impact jarred his whole arm and shoulder so violently that the sword, on rebounding, flew from his hand a matter of some paces.

Massaging his tingling arm, he bent forward to examine the spot he had hit. He could not find it! There was no sign of a nick in that hairline of an edge, not the tiniest dent.

He picked up his sword. A large V-shaped notch had been hacked out of its cutting edge. The Pylon had bitten the sword—not the sword the Pylon!

Lightly he ran his fingertips down the part of the Pylon's corner where he had smitten, endeavouring to feel an indication of what he could not see. Immediately blood trickled from his finger, which had been cut deeply by that edge. In truth, the Pylon was sharper than the sword. The Pylon of Blood!

He made his bed at the foot of the Pylon that night and lay awake long and late, endlessly going over plans for conquering the tower above him. But no plan could be brought to satisfaction.

For the salient fact was that the substance of the Pylon was far too hard for any rungs to be hammered into it or pegs to support any kind of ladder. For hours he revolved in his mind a plan for lashing ladders one upon the other by bindings which encircled, by some inconceivable method, the whole vast trunk of the Pylon. But he realised that the stoutest rope, even if he could get it round the Pylon's body, would be shorn into four pieces by the incredibly sharp corners as soon as the slightest strain was put upon it.

He slept little and rose at dawn to begin his journey back to the Palace.

He arrived there late, tired and in a bad mood, ate a huge supper, would see no one, and went to bed and slept as one dead.

In the morning, refreshed, he tackled the problem anew. But still he could make no headway.

Pacing restlessly in the garden, he was approached by a silent Benevo.

"Ha! Benevo," he greeted that patriarchal man. "I have a story to tell you, and would see what you make of it."

He told everything in detail from the moment he had begun the ascent of the White Pylon until his return from the valley of the Red Pylon.

"So," he concluded, "the third Message remains a-top of that accursed thing far out of reach. There is a way—it is written that there is a way. But what is it? By the Gods, what is it?"

Benevo pondered.

"I can see no way. I am sure there is no known way," he said finally. "Might I enquire, Sire, if you have any notion of the form of this secret of conquest, of what nature it is likely to be?"

Rodan stared.

"Of course not, apart from it being some form of power, as it must be."

"Spiritual power?"

Rodan laughed his loud ironic laugh

"You do even my father an injustice! He did not waste time trying to lay hold upon mere vapour. What can be accomplished by windy words and a doleful, pious face?"

"Fair speech and example may win its victories, Sire."

"Go, then, Benevo, and preach before the Mag Fort. I warrant that an arrow will pass through your throat before twenty words have."

"We have spoiled our pitch there, Sire, by making all our initial approaches warlike ones. Naturally the Magmen are now suspicious. The only method left to us is to make regular daily pilgrimages to the Fort in small processions, with our hands manifestly empty save for banners proclaiming our wish to confer peaceably with them with a view to exchanging ambassadors, emissaries and lecturers. Then both peoples will come to understand each other and the Mag Fort will melt away in goodwill. Within a generation, possibly, the two kingdoms will unite and the world will be a unity for ever."

"Come down from the clouds, Benevo. The brutal truth is that your bands of defenceless pilgrims will be massacred as fast as they present themselves."

"Undoubtedly, Sire, the earlier emissaries will meet that fate. They must be our martyrs, but their sacrifice will not be meaningless. For the pilgrims will go forth daily, never on any account showing fear or offering resistance. Resistance only sets up opposing resistance, and will make the Magmen feel justified in their slaughtering. But soon they will not feel justified in going on killing people who offer no harm, who accept their arrows passively. They will begin to doubt themselves and admire the courage of those unflinching people, people who come day after day to offer them peace. And from that moment it is only a step before they begin to believe that our people mean what they say. Then the barrier will be opened, the Fort breached—by spiritual power."

"And how many lives will this spiritual conquest cost?" sneered Rodan.

"Not a tenth as many as a long and bloody war to achieve that union by physical force, Sire."

"You sound very persuasive, Benevo. I begin to perceive why my father warned me against your weakening influence."

"I preach strength, Sire, not weakness."

Rodan suddenly lost his temper.

"That idiotic behaviour is not strength: it is pitiful weakness—of the mind. Insanity. Strength is—this!"

He closed his right hand into a fist and smote with all his force a monumental stone urn containing earth and flowers, standing, like a swelling rosebud, upon a thin stem arising from the balustrade. The stone stem broke with a crack. The urn toppled heavily to the hard terrace, smashed and bestrewed

the ground with pieces of itself, earth and broken flowers.

BENEVO surveyed the results of that example calmly and commented in an unhurried voice:

"A man went out one day wearing a heavy cloak. The wind boasted it would soon separate the cloak from the man. It blew its hardest, trying to wrench the cloak from the man's shoulders by force. But the man only gripped the cloak the tighter, wrapping it more closely round himself. When the wind had failed the sun said it would try. It shone down upon the man gently, but steadily. And presently the man thawed out and became so warm that he laid the cloak aside of his own accord. Suggestion is more powerful than physical force. Physical force is never necessary and never justifiable."

"Anyone can make up a fable to prove a point," said Rodan grimly. "I'll prove to you in actions, not in fairy stories, that physical force *is* effective. And I'll bring the result in short order, not in a generation. Now I am going to consult someone who might be a positive Advisor, not a negative one. Watch your step, Benevo—I might have been wrong in my estimate of your intelligence. I can have a fool for Advisor any day if I want one."

He strode furiously away.

He made for the house of Oelin, which was little more than a sort of large barn on the outskirts of the Palace grounds.

Oelin was the Royal Soothsayer and Astrologer, and by way of an amateur in chemistry, alchemy and black magic. He had been favoured by the gullible old King Fero, but Rodan was contemptuous of the man and the nature of his activities and normally had no dealings with him. His main motive in going to see him now was pique about Benevo, though he remembered the words of the first Message, referring to Oelin: "*It is written in the stars that he is to play a great part in this adventure. Seek help, therefore, in his house.*"

Oelin was not in the house when he got there, but the door was open. He walked in.

The place was just a big shack, one high, long, rafted room—Oelin's den, laboratory, dining-room and bedroom all in one. Rodan looked curiously around it.

All the far wall was taken up by a star map, very neat and detailed. Mysterious lines, both curved and straight, joined the points of some stars, presenting configurations which meant nothing to Rodan whatever they conveyed to Oelin. Over another wall sprawled the body and tentacles of a stuffed octopus, a star in itself.

On a table a translucent globe mounted upon a pedestal glowed with a steady white light like the sun. Gently, Rodan touched its curving surface; it was quite cold. He felt a little more respect for Oelin: the man knew things of practical value.

In a glass flask standing upon a bare bench a thick yellow liquid bubbled and frothed as though it were boiling upon a fire; but it was not. Descending from unseen strings, the distended and sealed stomach-sacs of pigs swayed gently beneath the rafted ceiling. In a corner were a pair of iron stands with brackets, and between them on a free axle span a thick wheel of wood, with nothing at all to show whence it derived its motive power.

Despite himself, Rodan felt a little uncomfortable. It was as though invisible beings were in this room, causing these phenomena and watching derisively.

Just then Oelin came in. He was, strangely, an unprepossessing figure, with anything but a confident mien. Possibly he thought he discovered wonders more by accident than merit. Perhaps he really did.

He was small, fat, shifty-eyed, very humble and aware of it, and prone to avert attention from his deficiencies by an unceasing flow of largely pointless talk, sentences interminable.

He was startled to see the King—*this* cold devil of a King—in his room.

"G-Good morning, Sire. I am flattered to be so quickly honoured by a visit from your illustrious Majesty, used as I was to seeing King Fero—may he prosper in the new land—almost daily in the course——"

"What is this scheme, this fantastic business of Pylons, you concocted with my father?" cut in Rodan impatiently.

"It is no scheme, Sire; it is a Mystery written in the stars, of which even I do not know the meaning. I am but the humble instrument which translates heavenly symbols and their meaning becomes plain only after they have been used, as it were, by us in our fashion, following their line blindly through our own lives and seeking——"

"Is the substance of the Red Pylon of your fashioning?"

"Yes, Sire. A composition of powdered stone mixed into a thick paste by the addition of a certain fluid, coloured as may be by dye, and easily formative in its early state but setting over a month into a hardness like diamond——"

"Will nothing cut into it?"

"Nothing that I have a conscious knowledge of, Sire, and I cannot see——"

"What do you men—*conscious* knowledge? Is it possible you have the secret without knowing it?"

"Quite possible, Sire, for there are many things I have discovered which seem to mean nothing to me; I only know they happen, but I have no wit in applying them to ends for my, or other people's, purposes, and until——"

"Show me your discoveries. All of them."

"Certainly, Sire. Let us begin with this inexplicable metal which attracts other metal to it by invisible force. . . ."

Producing materials, staging quick demonstrations, Oelin went through his bag of tricks, talking volubly the while, and Rodan was frequently astonished, but not inspired, by them.

Until there came one particular demonstration, and then he cried: "That is it!" in a loud voice to the startled Astrologer, and made him repeat it and learned the secret of it.

And for many days after that they laboured together, chemist and King, producing large quantities of the thing which was to open the way to the top of the Red Pylon.

IV.

ALL the morning there had been great preparation, loading of many mules with large, mysterious boxes, food and other supplies, and now there was a gathering of the King's slaves (more accurately, men who had offended against the law of Argot and were now serving varying time sentences as slaves in the King's household, his mines and his quarries, as punishment). Benevo gathered that an expedition was being formed to leave that day.

As he stood watching Rodan came striding along.

"Good morning, Sire."

"Good morning, Benevo. Prepare yourself for a journey. The time has come for me to start demonstrating to you my philosophy of direct action *in* direct action."

"I doubt whether I shall be convinced, Sire, but I will come."

"Be ready within the hour, then."

On time, the procession of mounted men, laden mules and slaves on foot started their long journey to the Red Pylon.

It was not till the morning of the third day that they reached their objective, and Benevo had his first view of the Pylon of Blood. He could not but think of the amount of labour that must have gone into the building of the thing, and, indeed, he had known that King Fero had spent a quarter of a lifetime supervising a secret work far away. Benevo never knew till now what it was: he only knew that a multitude of slaves had been conscripted for the work and had never returned. The sinister Red Pylon had tasted greatly of human blood long ere it had taken Rodan's few drops, for there had been a massacre to preserve the secret of its existence.

Rodan called the Captain of the Guard to him.

"You have had your orders," he said. "See that the slaves waste no time in carrying them out."

"Yes, Sire."

The soldier saluted and withdrew.

Rodan turned to Benevo.

"Behold the Pylon of Blood," he said, and pointed to the apex of it. "Up there is the third Message from my father. Tell me, Benevo, from your wisdom how I can read it."

"Is it not possible to hammer in climbing irons, Sire?"

"No. The Pylon is harder than iron, harder than any gem. And its edges are sharper than broken glass."

Benevo pondered long, but at the end was forced to admit that he could not think of any satisfactory way.

"Could you not make daily pilgrimages to the Pylon and soften it with your goodwill?" asked Rodan, at his most ironic.

"The analogy is false, Sire. It is not a moral problem, but purely a physical one, and can be solved only in a physical way."

"It is a problem of conquest, Benevo, and every such problem is a physical one."

Benevo was silent. To argue about spirituality with a man who had none of it in his being was about as useful as arguing about the colour of a flower with a man congenitally blind.

The slaves had now unloaded the mules and were piling the many scores of large boxes in rows all round the base of the Pylon, heaped one on top of the other and pressed hard against the Pylon walls. This at last finished, they went on to cover the boxes thickly with earth, stamping upon it and smiting it with flat and heavy tools so that it was compressed tightly. Yet they left four narrow gaps in the piled earth, one at the centre of each side of the Pylon, so that one could yet see some corners and edges of the boxes. But soon these portions of the boxes disappeared from view beneath the gathered brushwood with which they stuffed the gaps.

A strange procedure and meaningless to Benevo.

Now four slaves stationed themselves, one at each side of the Pylon, with flaming torches. The rest of the slaves were herded into a bunch and taken to a spot in the woods not a great distance from where the watching Rodan and Benevo stood.

Rodan cupped his hands about his mouth and gave a great shout to the slaves with torches.

"Now!"

The slaves advanced simultaneously to the Pylon and each thrust his blazing torch into the brushwood in the gap on his particular side. Each paused to make certain that the wood had caught, and then turned his back to the Pylon and ran headlong into the woods.

The deserted Pylon stood in its clearing with blue smoke streaming from its foot. Then, with a loud crackling, long tongues of flame burst from the smoke and their redness seemed to pass into and become one with the Red Pylon. The fire grew bright indeed, and the lowering smoke drifted over the heads of the watchers.

WITHOUT a warning, a terrific red-white flash, so vivid that it darkened the blue sky during that moment and dazzled the eye, sprang, as it seemed, right through the foot of the Pylon. It was as though a thunderbolt had fallen there with deadly swiftness.

Hard upon it came the boom like the crash (but magnified in volume and resonance a thousandfold) of a breaker in a sea-cave. A boom that shook the

earth, shook every nerve in the body and had a falling backwash of a multitude of noises: the echo and re-echo around the valley: a single sharp crack like a glass beaker plunged into too hot water: a grinding and a creaking as though a long disused and rusted water-wheel was forced through half a revolution.

And accompanying this onslaught of light and sound came a thick flying shower of debris from the same sources—earth in lumps and powder, torn fragments of the boxes, and a fiery spray of burning brands.

Somehow Benevo found himself on his knees with these things hurtling past him, eardrums ringing and paining, and a scar of light yet seared upon the retinæ of his eyes.

He peered beneath the cover of his hand to see what had happened.

Just discernible through the smoky, trembling air was a black and slightly crooked hair-line drawn right across the Pylon, perhaps twenty feet from the ground. It seemed to thicken as he watched. He ran his eye up the height of the Pylon and, with a thrill of horror, he saw the whole great length of it rocking, the pinnacle describing a long ellipse in the sky in the manner of the top-mast of a ship at sea.

He sought again that black line, but it was a hair-line no longer: it was a broadening gap, and suddenly one end of it became a streak of daylight.

The Pylon had broken right through: it was off balance and it was toppling and falling towards them.

With a majestic slowness it came, paralysing in its deliberation, straight down upon them, black against the light, growing enormously wide as it came as if to prevent them escaping to either side.

When extinction seemed certain and Benevo's momentary panic had passed into resignation, something that was never understood happened. Possibly a corner slipped suddenly sideways from the broken-topped pedestal. Anyway, the falling column seemed to twist a little in mid-air and the whole mass of it landed not half a spear cast to the right of them with a tremendous crash that threw Benevo up and clear of the ground by the spreading force of its impact. And that crash silenced, like the shutting of a door, the shrieks of fear which immediately preceded it.

For it had fallen right across the herded crowd of slaves in the wood; the sight of its huge bulk blotting out the sun, crashing down through the tree-tops above their very heads, was the last thing most of those slaves saw.

The Pylon of Blood had fed once more.

Benevo lay upon the ground, but Rodan was on his feet, and Benevo believed that not once through all this had he been thrown from them.

"See, Benevo!" Rodan exclaimed triumphantly. "Force applied in the right place! The shortest way. No painful climb for the Message this time—one blow and I brought it down to *me!*"

He leaped upon his trembling and frightened mount and spurred through the trees to the side of the Pylon which lay nearest to them. Paralleling this high red wall as best he could, he made his way towards the fallen pinnacle.

Some torn and smashed bodies lay half under the base of the wall and half remaining in the world of light and air; here and there merely a single arm reached out from below it in motionless supplication, or, ridiculously, a pair of legs.

One slave was caught only by his foot and lay across the path twisting in pain and fright. His sweating face was uplifted to Rodan as he approached and mutely asked help. Rodan's pale eyes regarded him unseeingly and he rode on and over him. The horse, in its manner, more merciful than its master, tried to avoid treading on the trapped man, but, by a mishap, a rear hoof caught the slave in the forehead and finished the work the Pylon had done but partially.

THE top of the wall sloped gently down as Rodan rode on, was an arm's length above his head, came down level with his eyes and then, of a sudden, he rounded a clump and found himself at the end of the Pylon. He dismounted and went eagerly to the six-foot square top, now roughly perpendicular. By the chance of one in four, the Pylon had landed on the side which presented right way up the plaque inlaid on its summit, and Rodan read it without effort:

To my son, Rodan.

Greetings once again my son. Now have you proven that you are blessed with the guile which is a necessary complement to the other qualities of the conqueror you have shown. Do not think this effort of yours has been for little. This is part of the road and you could come no other way. But the end of the road is now in sight. It lies upon the summit of the third and last Pylon, the Pylon of Heaven, which lies from this place a matter of twenty leagues, upon a mountain slope in the Wild Country.

(At which point there was engraven another detailed map, showing the location of the third Pylon.)

In the Message which is there you will read the final wisdom which can place you upon the throne of the world.

You have not failed yet. You cannot fail now. Onwards, my son—it is the last trial!

Your father,

FERO.

Rodan bit his lip and scowled at the plaque. He had thought to find enlightenment here. Yet once again it was deferred. There was another Pylon! But it would be the last, definitely—he knew that now, at least.

Well, there was nothing to be done but seek it out and conquer it in its turn.

He mounted and rode slowly and thoughtfully back towards the place where he had left Benevo.

He encountered the Advisor on the way, leading a small group of soldiers and slaves who had survived, seeking to succour the trapped and injured. But there was nothing that could now be done. The weight of the Pylon had been altogether too crushing, and even those partly caught had quickly died from loss of blood and shock.

"We set up camp here, Benevo," said Rodan. "It will be in your charge, for I am going on a journey, possibly for two days. You will await my return. If you want to know where I have gone, read the plaque on the end of this Pylon. But ere I go—a meal."

Beside the broken stump of the Red Pylon they pitched camp, got an order into things, had food prepared and served.

Both were thoughtful as they ate. Benevo regarded the riven base that stood above them and wondered again what mighty power had shorn through the apparently impregnable material or broken it with the mere shock of its unleashing: possibly the Pylon was brittle to some degree with all its hardness.

Rodan caught his eye, divined his thoughts and smiled mockingly.

"Do you wonder yet, Benevo?"

"Yes, Sire, I do. Obviously the power sprang from the contents of those boxes."

"It did. They were filled with a certain powder Oelin had discovered. If you would know, a powder which is a mixture of charcoal, sulphur and saltpetre, in this fashion. . . ."

And he told the proportion of the mixture and the manner of its preparation and application, so confined in a small space that it burst out in a mad rage, smiting all around it, when once fire ignited it.

"It was the only useful thing Oelin showed me with all his discoveries," said Rodan, and added acidly: "He did not realise that himself. He thought possibly it could be used in my quarries to blast rocks and save slaves labour! What are slaves for if not to labour?"

Almost Benevo answered, "To live," but he knew the comment would be meaningless to Rodan, and so withheld it.

Then Rodan set off on his journey to the Blue Pylon—the Pylon of Heaven.

It was a long and slow journey because trackless—this Wild Country abounded with thorny brush of strength and obduracy, a ubiquitous hindrance to progress that discouraged any exploration. And, indeed, Rodan had quite lost his way in the tangled maze when he was lifted out of his exasperation by a chance glimpse of a salient from the Mag Mountains, which exhibited a slim pillar rising far above the undistinguishable vegetation on its slope. It was in quite a different direction from where he imagined the Blue Pylon to be.

He stared at it for some time. It was certainly blue—only with distance. But he knew that gently tapering outline by now: it could only be the Blue Pylon.

He set off through the brush again.

A LONG time afterwards he reached the foot of the salient, and leading his horse by the rein, climbed slantwise across it to the Pylon. Every now and then through a gap in the trees he saw its enormous blue height reaching to the blue above, or rather, the upper two-thirds of it: its base was yet concealed.

The slope became steeper yet. At length it became difficult for the horse. He was forced to tether it to a tree and leave it for the time being. He picked his way onward and upward, on foot.

Very soon a low murmuring came to his ears from somewhere ahead. It grew steadily, the murmuring, as he progressed, and at length became recognisable as the sound of rushing water, a growl now, becoming ever more thunderous. Presently one could feel its booming vibration through the feet, and it so dominated the air that had Rodan a companion at his side he could not have heard him speak.

He stepped through an opening in the brush and out unexpectedly on to a rocky ledge, and was taken aback by the prospect before him.

He stood on the edge of a gorge. Dead opposite him was the Blue Pylon, its foot set in the bottom of the gorge. And though he stood high above that foot, the Pylon came up to his level and then soared twice as high again into the blue.

An impressive sight was the Pylon, and robbed of much of its awe the massive waterfall which formed the head of the gorge only a small distance away from it. Indeed, the island rock on which the Pylon was based, and whose area was almost completely covered by it, was half obscured by the driving spray on the rebound from the thick sheets and columns of falling water as they plunged with unending roar into a cataclysmic pool.

From that spinning, stormy pool great gouts of tortured water shot past the rocky base or dashed themselves into further spray upon it. And all this hurtling broken water met and joined again in pell-mell rapids which flung off down the gorge as if a devil were riding after them.

Despite the speed of the rushing river, and the depth to which it must have eroded its rocky bed, it was surprisingly wide, and the surface of agitated and foaming water stretched all the way to the far opposite wall of the gorge.

Thought Rodan: how did my father get his labour and materials to that perilous islet? For one thing, he guessed, there must be an easier way of approach lower down the wall of the gorge on this side, which he could not see because he stood on an overhanging bluff. Possibly the path was almost down to the water's edge. And from this lower ledge some sort of natural rock bridge must originally have spanned the gap to the island and been part of it. For it was manifest that the island was much too far from

the edge of the water for an artificial bridge to be thrown to it. It was even beyond bow-shot.

And when his father had finished building, that bridge had been deliberately demolished, and the Pylon isolated.

Why?

So that Rodan should not reach the base of it and repeat the trick which conquered the Red Pylon.

He supposed for the moment that he *could* reach the base. Then what room was there to pile his mountain of boxes around it! The border of rock left around the Pylon was scarce wide enough for a man to get his foot upon. Not even wide enough to support a single box.

He doubted not the Blue Pylon was made from the same tough, dyed composition as the Red Pylon, and therefore no fixtures could be made on it.

Even if he could fix sufficient boxes in position, they would be saturated, if not washed away, by the torrents of water which leapt high all round the Pylon's base. Any fire, any spark even, would be quenched in a moment.

But that problem was overshadowed by the primary problem of reaching the islet.

Now Rodan was a seaman in addition to all his other abilities. He had sailed out to sea probably farther than any fisherman, in vain search of any other possible land but Argot and Mag. He knew how to handle every type of boat and ship. And he knew that there was not a chance that way of getting across the fury of that maelstrom alive. A boat in that would be as helpless as a straw in a hurricane.

Projects of building rafts piled with boxes and trying to float them with the current so that they lodged against the rock were idle to think upon. The current was unpredictable: it journeyed about many whirlpools before it reached the rock. And if the raft did happen to get to and hit the Pylon rock (against all the chances of missing it altogether) it would be merely dashed to fragments.

" If I cannot even reach the bottom of the Pylon, how am I ever going to reach the top ? " he thought, in a whirl of perplexity.

He carried this perplexity back with him to the place where he had left his horse, to the camp of the Red Pylon, to the Palace, and finally to the house of Oelin.

V.

OELIN was working a most peculiar design upon a parchment when Rodan strode into the house. So absorbed was he that he did not notice the King's entrance, and chancing to look up in thought, found himself staring straight into the pale eyes he dreaded. He jumped up, a-quiver with apology and loud with it.

" Oelin, what other discoveries have you besides those you showed me ? " came Rodan's sharp, overriding voice.

" Not a great many, Sire, though some of great wonderment, and indeed perhaps more marvellous than any— "

"Show me them—now."

Oelin bobbed, and hastened to display more of his oddities: the metal which rolled itself into silvery balls which, when hit smartly, resolved themselves into a myriad smaller, perfectly spherical, balls; the invisible gas imprisoned in a flask which made a glowing twig, when dropped into it, flare up at once into flame; the ground piece of glass which made an ant regarded through it appear the size of a rat; and several other things.

When the fat little chemist's exhibition had come to an end, Rodan bit his lip.

"I can see nothing there of use to me," he said. He glanced around the room. With an all-including gesture towards its curiosities, he said: " Explain these things to me."

Oelin explained the causes of the effects of the cold white lamp, the living chemicals in the flask, the mysterious spinning wheel.

" And those bladders hanging up there," said Rodan, pointing to the stomach-sacs at the ceiling. " What are they ? "

" They are the stomach bladders of pigs, Sire, emptied and dried and filled with a certain gas which causes them to float in the air and indeed rise high in it: they are not *hanging* from the ceiling, Sire; they are pressing against it, uplifted by this gas which——"

" By the gods!" swore Rodan. " There it is! Quickly—tell me how this gas is made."

So Oelin demonstrated how it was that when a particular acid (which he called by another name than hydrochloric) was poured upon a particular metal (which he called by another name than zinc) the action set up gave off this gas (which he called by another name than hydrogen).

And the rest of that day Rodan did nothing but make this gas and experiment with balloons filled with it.

Over the next month or two he worked every minute on building a large enough model to carry his own weight, hundreds of these gas-filled sacs being contained in a larger covering of strong silk fabric. This design perfected, he built a still larger balloon to carry a much greater weight — an enormous turnip-shaped thing, with a carrying basket slung below it and adjusted vanes to guide to some extent its direction in the currents of the air.

And to the amazement of his subjects, he journeyed in this strange craft through the air back and forth over the Palace, day after day, always experimenting with the management and guidance of the contraption. Until at last he believed he could control it almost as well as he could a sailing ship on the ocean.

He could not help but boast of this achievement to Benevo.

"You may float into the clouds on the wings of your fancies, Benevo. But, behold, by a little action and concentrated effort, I can do the same in actuality!"

"I would rather be up there in my imagination than in that thing," replied Benevo with a smile.

"Ah, but then your rewards are only imagination too. This 'thing' is designed to bring me a tangible reward."

"I surmise this reward is connected with the Blue Pylon of Heaven, Sire."

"It is, and this very day I will secure my reward."

And, in fact, within the hour he was away in the balloon, setting a course for the Blue Pylon, for the wind was in the right direction that day. He travelled high and smoothly over the countryside, glimpsed the green hill where the Kings rested, passed over the thick woods beyond and saw the broken body of the Pylon of Blood looking like a long red gash in the verdant land.

Always paralleling his course, far away to the left and rearing their jagged eminences into the thin air, thousands upon thousands of feet above him, were the Mag Mountains.

Now he adjusted his vanes and made indirectly towards those peaks, looking always for the jutting salient which bore the Blue Pylon upon its slope. Presently it hove into view, and the swift river which tore down the mountainside and plunged into the gorge sparkled and flashed like living silver in the sun.

The wind was dropping now and he deemed that the gods were on his side.

FROM being a mere stick in the ground the Pylon was already revealing its true titanic proportions, and he judged that he was too low for his purpose. There were some heavy rocks in the basket, carried for ballast. He heaved two or three of them overboard and the lightened balloon rose, became nearer to a level with the top of the Pylon.

And suddenly the wind fell away altogether and left him drifting a thousand feet from his goal.

Now the task began in earnest. He had fixed a kind of waterwheel (only its rotating paddles, or vanes, were designed to beat the air) on a bracket fixed in the under-structure of the craft and turned by a system of ropes, pulleys and a geared rotary handle. Working this mechanism furiously, he sought to push the balloon through the motionless air.

Tirelessly he slaved at that handle, his long golden hair tossing and falling continuously half across his face with the effort. But for all that, the movement could be measured in finger-spans. The device was too small for the bulk of the balloon.

Then, out of nowhere, a fortuitous (or was it?—no, truly the gods were on his side) gust of wind sprang and carried him best part of the way ere it died away to nothingness once more. With this shorter distance to cover, the paddle-wheel could show visible results. At last, sweating, but triumphant, he came within a few feet of the blue flat square of the summit, and even fewer above the level of it. He could see the inlaid plaque clearly: the fourth Message, the ultimate secret—at last!

His plan had been prepared ere he set out. With an effort, he heaved a huge cube of soft lead, with a strong rope securely fastened around it, to the edge of the basket. The basket tilted askew with its weight. He worked the handle with his free hand. The balloon crept forward, directly over the platform of the summit now.

Judging the aim with infinite care, he dropped the cube of lead exactly in the middle of the square. The balloon leapt vertically. It was tethered to the cube of lead, but it recked little of that. It dragged the cube up after it, dangling on its rope end like a plumb weight.

Rodan almost groaned. He had not expected quite such a violent reaction. But, slowly, in that windless air, the balloon began to settle again, and Rodan helped it by letting just the smallest quantity of gas escape from the valve he had designed. The cube of lead landed again on the summit, but nearer the edge now than the centre.

But it was sufficient. It held the balloon still. The rope again was vertical.

Very slowly, very carefully, trying not to disturb the balance of things, Rodan climbed over the edge of the basket and slid inch by inch down the rope. His feet came upon the cube of lead. And squatting upon it, he was able to read the fourth Message on the plaque not a yard away.

To my son, Rodan.

Hail, Emperor of the World!

For this you are if you but realise it. The wand of power is firmly in your hands. Use it but rightly, in a manner which you must see, and the throne is yours—ours—for as long as the world be.

I would that I could see you at this triumphant moment. O, son, I am proud of you! This famous conquest is the beginning of an era of glory and pomp without end. In all this, think sometimes of me—who made it possible. But this moment for you is my real reward.

Your father,
FERO.

When this message had burned itself into his memory Rodan stood up, seized the rope and hauled himself up it hand over hand. He took no especial care now, and, indeed, his pulling caused the balloon to come down towards him and incline sideways, away from the Pylon, so that he was hanging by his hands over hundreds of feet of space. Gazing down, he saw the sheer length of the Pylon to the cataract that foamed at its foot.

But he knew his strength and smiled and pulled himself back into the basket without effort and without haste.

He had no further need for his peculiar anchor and cut the balloon free from it.

Now all he could do was sit in his lofty seat and wait for the calm to end and make best use of what breeze then came to tack his way back to the Palace.

But it was three long days before he saw the Palace again.

He had, literally, been blown round in circles by the errant winds of fortune, once far out to sea and almost out of sight of the land. But fighting, working, using every scrap of the craft of manœuvring he had so painstakingly learned, throughout three foodless and waterless days and nights, he guided the balloon back to its starting point.

Nor were those three days entirely wasted. In the period of meditation before the wind arose he had been able to think out what was almost certainly the answer to the third Message, and which, indeed, was the answer to everything, the whole enigma of the three Pylons. And this added strength to his efforts to return.

No hint of whether Benevo was glad or sorry to see him back showed on the aged Advisor's calm face. He merely asked: "Did you find what you sought, Sire?"

And Rodan boasted that he had, told how he had conquered the Pylon of Heaven and read the last Message and what that Message was. But he did not add what he thought the Message meant.

When he had eaten and bathed he went to the house of Oelin. And this oddly assorted pair spent many days in experiment, Rodan coming every morning and not departing until darkness had fallen.

On the morning of the day when the work was due to be completed, Rodan did not come alone. With him was a tremendously powerful ape of a man, low-browed, hirsute, with little red-rimmed eyes. A two-handed sword depended from his waistbelt, and big as he was, almost trailed the ground. The fat little Soothsayer could not take his eyes off him, and watched him covertly all the time the King was addressing him.

Said the King, kicking gently with his toe-cap the pile of iron containers the pair had wrought between them these many days: "Only two more, eh, Oelin, and we are finished?"

"That is my calculation, Sire, which I checked again last night, and——"

"Let us get to work," said Rodan abruptly.

In the afternoon the two finished containers were added to the pile.

"That," said the King, "is that. You have been very helpful, Oelin."

"But, Sire, it is only my duty to serve you. Beside, your Majesty, I am as nothing, my life is worthless, and your every wish is my command——"

"Is that so, indeed?" asked Rodan with a mock serious interest. "I would not wish you to be saddled with a worthless life. And thus it follows that I command you not so to be. Do not thank me, Oelin—I am only too happy to do this little thing for you in return for your services."

He nodded almost imperceptibly to the big hairy man, who happened to the the royal executioner, and in a moment Oelin's wrists were pinioned behind him, first by hands of steel and then by bindings of rope.

"Mercy! Mercy!" cried the fat little man, the shortest speech of his life, and, incidentally, the last.

"Mercy?" quoth the King. "Is this not mercy?" Thus Rodan's humour.

Oelin blubbered like a punished child. The tears streamed down his chubby face and dripped upon his protruding paunch, but presently they ceased to do that for the good reason that the face was no longer associated in any way with the paunch, and, in fact, lay some distance from it; and also the eyes wept no more.

"When someone ceases to be of use to you, let him cease to be altogether, or he may be of use to your enemies," said Rodan, with a thin-lipped smile at the executioner.

That efficient man, who was stone deaf, grinned back like an ape and continued to clean his bloody sword.

VI.

WHEN Rodan returned to the Palace he issued the order of mobilisation. Benevo came to him at once and, though his bearing was as imperturbable as ever, uneasiness was within him.

"Why this order, Sire?"

"Preventative measures," replied Rodan ambiguously.

"Does your Majesty fear revolution?"

"No—invasion."

"By the Magmen?"

"Who else?"

"Sire, such a thing cannot be. What signs are there?"

Rodan's face grew darker.

"The signs are that at any moment you are going to advise me without being so requested, Benevo. Indeed, such a thing cannot be."

"I beg your Majesty's pardon. I would but check the source of information, because I believe your Majesty has been misled."

"*I* am the source of the information. For many nights now I have been watching the Red Light of Mag. It is much more frequent of late than ever before. The only possible reason for this sudden increase of activity is that the Magmen must be making the ultimate spurt to complete their preparations for invasion."

"Sire, I tell you they are not really a war-like people: they desire only to be unmolested. And the Red Light is not the light of any forge—it is a natural phenomenon."

"So, Benevo? And what is the source of *your* information?" sarcastically.

For a moment Benevo was silent. Then he said: "So I do truly believe, Sire."

"No doubt. You have many strange beliefs. I do not share them. I have sought to change them by example. Tomorrow morning you shall come with me and I will try yet again. Go now. I have preparations of my own to make."

Benevo was little wiser when he sought Rodan's presence next morning. He only knew that the Army had been given its orders and departed on an overnight march.

Rodan was not in his room. Benevo was directed to find him in the garden, and there he was making a survey of his balloon, which was staked to the ground.

"Good morning, Benevo. I am ready. We shall waste no time lest the wind change. Forget your dignity for a moment and climb into the travelling carriage of my craft. We are going a journey."

"But, Sire——"

"It is a command. I am in haste. Do not hold back: the air is fresh up there and the view magnificent. It is the best place to see the example I have prepared for you."

Reluctantly, Benevo got into the large basket. He found it already half full of queer metal containers, each with a tuft of white cord protruding from it. He was not suspicious of them: he was very ignorant of the working of the balloon and thought they had something to do with it.

Rodan called a couple of slaves. They loaded rocks into the basket and stood by as Rodan climbed aboard. At his order they uprooted the stakes and slowly the heavily-laden balloon rose.

It made fair speed at no great height, and once Benevo got used to it he enjoyed this novel method of travel. From their following round black shadow on the ground he judged they were moving about as fast as a cantering horse.

Rodan set the vanes and the course, and presently it became manifest to Benevo that they were making for the one pass in the Mag Mountains—the pass barred by the Mag Fort. Presently he could see the white block of the Fort itself, in the dark entrance to the ravine. And camped round that entrance, on the plain in a great crescent, was the Army of Argot!

Rodan saw his surprise and the ironic smile touched the corners of his mouth.

"My example is on the grand scale," he said. "It was only made possible by the three Pylons."

Benevo looked his interrogation.

"Would I have looked for and found that blasting powder and its possibilities had I not been set the problem of the Red Pylon? No—it is necessity which drives us to discover such things. It was necessity which impelled me to search for the means of reaching the top of the Blue Pylon, and that means also showed me the only way of applying the powder to gain my object, after the last Message had given me to think about it."

Benevo still seemed puzzled.

"Do you not see, Benevo? The powder is my force applied in the right place. The right place is the Mag Fort, the one bar to the conquest of Mag; it will be cracked open and way made for our army. But how to get the powder to the Fort? It is impossible to approach the Fort on foot and live. It cannot be reached from above except—this way! We can be right above them and yet out of the range of all their arrows. But they will not be out of range of our powder."

He laughed softly and his pale eyes glowed with anticipatory excitement.

"I am going to drop it on them and on the Fort in these containers, which have slow-burning cords attached to them so that the fire will not ignite them until they land: I have calculated it. From the results of my experiments I doubt whether there will even be one Magman left alive to try to hold the broken Fort."

BENEVO had grown steadily more horrified during this explanation and boast, and he exclaimed: "Then, Sire, all the time you have planned to make war! It was a lie about preventative measures."

"It was not a lie," contradicted Rodan sharply. "These are preventative measures. It is a preventative war. I tell you the Magmen are preparing to attack us: I am only making sure we get our blow in first to protect our land."

"That is not true, Sire. As I have told you, the Magmen are a peace-loving people and would contemplate no such act."

"You dare to give me the lie, Benevo? Why should you presume to have greater knowledge of the Magmen than I?"

"Because I am myself a Magman, Sire."

"*What?*"

It was the most astonishing thing Rodan had heard in his life. He was so shaken that he steadied his giant frame by gripping the edge of the travelling basket with one hand. They stood staring at each other for some moments as the balloon scudded before the wind, ever nearer to the Mag Fort, where an alarm was being sounded at its coming. Which same coming set the crescent Army of Argot to its feet and to arms: for the first sign of the balloon was the arranged signal for the Army to prepare to attack.

"Yes, Sire," said Benevo presently. "I was a soldier in that Fort when I was a very young man. I was consumed with curiosity to explore Argot, and one night I lowered myself from the ramparts and set out alone, though I knew there would be no going back. It proves that there can be little difference between our peoples, for I was accepted as a wandering man of Argot without suspicion. I found my way into your grandfather's Court, but it was your father who raised me to the position of Advisor."

" Then it will be I who will depose you, when this business is finished," said Rodan coldly. " We want no Magmen in our councils. Do you still deny that the Red Light means preparation for war?"

" Sire, it has nothing to do with war. It is a strange red fire which sometimes spurts from a crater in the earth, from some great central fire far under the land, of such heat that molten rock pours from the crater. There is an old prophecy that one day this central fire will suddenly burst forth with great power and so split and break the land that all of it will crumble and sink into the sea and Argot and Mag will be no more. My word upon it that the Red Light means nothing more than that."

" The word of a Magman counts not with me, and will not change my beliefs one iota," said Rodan. " Not that you have ever changed my beliefs, Benevo. Force was always my god. See me at my devotions now."

And he became the man of action, trimming the vanes of the balloon so that it should pass directly over the Fort, throwing ballast out to gain height, keeping a watchful eye on the disposition of his army and also on the black dots of heads of the agitated guards of the Fort. He prepared his containers for release, lit a shielded oil lamp in a corner of the carriage for their quick ignition.

Benevo watched in despair. Despite all his arguments, reasoning, entreaties, facts and example by behaviour, he had not averted war. Death and destruction, pain, cruelty and anguish of soul were about to be unleashed upon the peoples of the world who did not in their hearts desire such things, but were under the iron laws of tradition, in the power of old accepted leadership.

And all that power was concentrated in one man, this man beside him, who had lit the fuse of his first devilish container and was now leaning out over the edge of the basket in the very act of aiming and dropping it.

He must be stopped.

Regardless of all else he must be stopped.

All Benevo's illusions fell away from him in a flash. He saw clearly that things had passed beyond words: words were indeed vapour, and only action counted.

He bent and seized the legs of the precariously balanced Rodan and, with one heave, threw him out of the carriage.

IF RODAN had not been divided between holding on to that important first container and holding on to the carriage, he might yet have saved himself. For he hung from the lip of the carriage by the fingers of one hand, while the other kept tenacious grip of the smoking container. And for a little while he fought to get both himself and the container back into the carriage, straining with all the strength of his mighty arm, glaring fixedly up at the white-faced Advisor who watched his efforts.

" The dove becomes a snake, eh?" he gritted as he heaved himself slowly up.

Benevo saw that Rodan would get back.

His mind became a blank now, with no thought moving in it. He felt only with his body the one gripping purpose: Rodan must be stopped. He picked up a rough ballast rock and raised it above his head.

Rodan saw his intention. The rock was going to smash down on his fingers. He had left it too late now: by no all-out effort could he beat that rock.

And, strangely, the ironic humour of it overcame him. He, Rodan, beaten by that ancient angel of peace! He grinned wolfishly.

" ' Physical force is never necessary and never justifiable '—you liar!" he jibed. " I have taught you at last, Benevo."

Such was the nature of the man that he laughed in triumph at this ultimate and unexpected conquest.

Then Benevo, with impassive face, brought the rock down, and, with a cry of pain, Rodan dropped into the gulf, still holding to his container.

With amazement the soldiers of Argot gazed up at their hurtling King. It seemed that he would drop plumb on to the Fort. But when he was yet high up, in mid-air, the fuse of the container, which had burned steadily away throughout the struggle for life, brought flame to the powder.

There was a bright flash in the air. A tight cloud of black smoke sprang into being and spread and lost substance slowly. In the dark heart of that cloud Rodan's short reign came to an end. A hard report reached the ears of the men on the ground.

The balloon had leapt up on the release of Rodan's weight and was now a small dot in the heavens and travelling swiftly on a wind in the upper air. The soldiers of Argot watched it as it went far out to sea, where presently it vanished from human vision altogether. And then, as men of one accord, they packed up their kit and made their way back to their homes.

The war was over before it had begun.

Not one of them ever saw Benevo again. I myself believe his lone voyage finished in, or within reasonable travelling distance of, China, and he was still very much alive when he got there.

Possibly he told his tale, and someone wriggled out of his old and tired head the secret of making gunpowder, a discovery so long attributed to the Chinese. Or, possibly, finding these yellow people of the unguessed outer world as peaceful and gentle as himself, he made the first fire-cracker for their amusement, and never dreamed of his gift to more sanguinary races.

As I said at the beginning, it is a matter of conjecture.

Rodan died, yet Rodan still lives

The Pylon of Blood was destroyed by its strange child, and that child still lives.

But the story of Benevo lives too.

WHITE MOUSE

By THORNTON AYRE

The girl from Venus — the man from Earth. Would such a mixed marriage be a success? — Even though they were both humans?

TO THOSE of you who wonder why the laws concerning interplanetary marriages are so strict, and to those others among you who have found yourselves captivated by the amazing music, writing and paintings of Lucia Veltique, let me tell a story.

For my own part, it is only because the memory of Lucia Veltique is still so fragrant that I feel inclined to dwell again on the events of twenty years ago, for, in recounting them, I can derive a sense of pleasure, in much the same way as one can detect the aroma of an exquisite perfume long after the bottle has been drained.

In those days I was a young man—twenty-seven to be exact—and space travel had been in being for many years. There had been blunders, of course, the inseparable accidents of enterprise and exloration, but gradually the inner ring of planets had been reached, investigated and either conquered or amalgamated with Earth.

With a thirst for adventure and no more sense of caution than one usually has at twenty-seven, I became Space-Engineer Jeffrey Haslam. My wanderings took me to every planet—to impossible Mercury, arid Mars and lastly to exotic Venus. And it was here where I first met Lucia.

The Venusians, perhaps because of their planet being similar to ours in size, are very like us, only frailer—as you will know for yourself these days. The perpetual absence of direct sunshine has deprived them of the tougher qualities which we, accustomed to the sun, have developed. It was this criminal lack of knowledge in those early days which brought about my own unhappiness. But I was saying—about Lucia. I first saw her at the trading station near Venus' Half-Way Mountains—that titanic range which sprawls across the wild planet's terminator and reaches to nearly five miles in the eternal clouds.

Lucia was small, slender and in the diaphanous draperies which most Venusian women wear, she seemed more like the popular conception of a fairy queen than anything else. Everything about her was tiny, yet perfectly developed. She was no more than five feet tall, her well shaped head crowned with a wind-swept mass of light flaxen hair. This, with the delicate ivory white skin which all Venusians have, and the big yellow eyes with abysmal pupils, made her the most beautiful creature I had ever seen.

We came to know each other. I saw to that. Her father and mother were as delightful as she was, jointly controlling the trading station. Lucia and I learned each other's language. For two years we met, every time my journeying took me to Venus.

We used to go for long walks in the dense, torrid jungles; we journeyed over the mud-flats together; we climbed the mountains. She was a carefree, happy soul, simple as a child in some things, mature as a middle-aged woman in others. And in bestowing talents upon her Nature had been generous. I discovered that she was a brilliant artist, that she could write prose either exquisitely funny or profoundly moving, according to her mood. Also she could play with a magic which held me spellbound—either on a Venusian instrument or upon the piano we had in the spaceship—and at times she composed pieces which for grandeur defeated anything I, or any of we Earth men, had ever heard before.

Can you wonder that I wanted to marry her? So much so that at the end of two and a half years' association with her I came to a decision, and the first person to whom I told it was old Henry Baythorp, our ship's physician. He was a gnarled, serious little man with wispy grey hair and an evil-smelling briar pipe. That is how I always remember him. To the stranger he probably appeared churlish, but to an intimate like myself I knew him to be a man of frank opinions and, when necessary, immense courage.

He sat coiled up in his bunk while I told him what I intended to do. With the energy of youth I raced through the details while he sat looking at me steadily with smoke coiling out of the crackling bowl of his pipe.

"Lad, you won't like this," he said finally, considering, "but my advice is, *don't!* Yes, yes, I know Lucia is a lovely girl," he went on, as I started

to interrupt. "As fair a picture as any man could wish to see—even at my age; but that's only the outside of the parcel, as it were. I think that if you marry that girl and take her back to Earth with you you'll regret it—and so will she. Besides, marriage between people of different planets hasn't yet been made legal. The eugenists haven't yet examined the possibilities of such unions."

"But there's no law against it, either," I pointed out. "That is why I want to marry Lucia before some committee or other thinks up the notion of banning interplanetary marriages. . . . Anyway, Lucia is quite willing."

"Mmmm. What do you plan to do when you get to Earth?"

"I'll give up space-roving. It won't interest me any more, and I'm getting to the age that doesn't make for a good spaceman. I've made a good deal of money in these last few years, so I propose to buy a decent home for Lucia and myself—somewhere in the country if I can—and then I'll take up an executive position. My papers qualify me for that."

He sighed, knocked the ashes out of his pipe on the bunk rail.

"Well, lad, if your mind is made up that's all there is to be said. I gave up trying to reason with youth—or love—long ago. It can't be done. . . . All I can suggest is that you think very carefully, because I'm convinced that it won't turn out as you expect. Nature, my boy," he added solemnly, wagging a finger at me. "You can't get behind the old lady. Lucia is a Venusian, born to this world: you are an Earth man, born to that world. Not much difference, you say? Well, we'll see. You'd be better off preserving a friendship with Lucia than marrying her."

I shook my head stubbornly. "I can't do that. I've promised her—and her people. The marriage is expected. It's the only logical outcome after our long acquaintance."

Baythorp shrugged and reached for his tobacco pouch.

"All right, lad. And if you can't find a best man and will take one thirty years older than yourself, remember me. . . ."

I WILL not say I forgot Dr. Baythorp's advice. In fact, I couldn't really; all I could do was push it in the back of my mind and try and pretend I hadn't heard it. At twenty-seven, deeply in love, you are guided by your heart, not your head, and such things as differing birthplaces just don't enter into your calculations.

So Lucia and I made all arrangements and it was decided that she should come back with me to Earth on our return journey, and when we arrived we could be married. Her parents would come for the ceremony only and then, tied to business at the trading post, they would have to leave for Venus again almost immediately.

On the day before we left Venus, Lucia and I found the time for one of our walks to the foothills of Half-Way Mountains. As usual, it was steaming hot, for during the 720-hour Venusian day the planet swelters in a hundred and twenty-five Fahrenheit degrees under its eternal clouds—and for me, anyway, it was too exhausting for much effort. So we selected a gigantic rock in the path of the hot mountain winds and sprawled ourselves upon it. Lucia, lithe and graceful, lay with her hands behind her head staring up at the creamy scum of clouds writhing far above.

Just for a moment an odd thought crossed my mind. She was a part of this hot world, with its sweeping winds and exotic jungle: she thrived and blossomed and lived with the sheer joy of living amidst this grey daylight. She fitted into the pattern with the exactness Nature had intended. Was I, a man of Earth—a man from a world of harsh contrasts—something of an interloper, a thief in a beautiful garden itching to snatch away the most perfect of all flowers?

"Jeff, is Earth very beautiful?" she asked me presently, in that gentle, pleading voice of hers.

"Depends," I answered. "Some parts of it are very much like this world of yours—jungles, heat and sunshine. . . ."

"I've never seen the sun," she reminded me, turning her face so that I saw her smile.

It was an odd reflection to think that she had never looked upon the orb which gives life to the Solar System, and yet her planet is twice as close to it as Earth.

"You will," I said. "It's a treat in store. You'll see it in space, and on Earth. . . . You'll like Earth, Lucia. There will be real scope for your talents—your music, your art, your writing. The people I live amongst will acclaim you. Especially in the big cities."

"I've often wondered about cities," she mused. "I've seen photographs of them and read about them. Everything about them is so different to anything I have ever known here. We only have the mountains and jungles, and the trading station and space-port. In fact, I suppose we're—backward?"

"Certainly Venus is a long way behind Earth in development," I agreed. "You have no radio, television, or atomic energy. You will wonder after a year on Earth how you ever managed to exist at all. It's surprising how environment changes one's outlook."

Looking back I can see now how prophetic I was when I said that—but just then nothing mattered. Lucia was mine. She loved me with all her heart and soul, and I her. I recall how much like a child she looked when, her big tawny eyes upon me, she asked slowly:

"Jeff, you will look after me well, won't you?"

"Look after you!" I echoed. "With my life if need be, dearest. You know that!"

She nodded as if satisfied, then looked about her at the wild landscape.

"I wonder if I shall ever see this again?" she murmured, sighing—and she said it in such a peculiar tone I cannot quite describe it. It had somehow a fatalistic resignation, as though she were giving up everything that meant happiness to her—as though she had felt a presentiment cross her sensitive, happy mind.

SO WE returned to Earth, and for two weeks Lucia had time in which to orientate herself. During these two weeks she had had but few comments to make upon my native planet. Rather, she seemed a little stunned by the enormity and power of a modern city after the wastes of Venus. But with her usual bright intelligence she spent a lot of her time examining the hundred and one new things which appealed to her, making friends readily by her happy laughter and total lack of guile.

As a man of some social position—for Space-Engineer was a high rank in those days—I attracted the newshounds. Lucia, the first woman of Venus—indeed, the first inhabitant—to ever come to Earth, became the target for photographers, magazine cover artists, dress designers, and all the usual avenues of publicity. I don't think she quite liked being the star attraction, but there was no way of avoiding it. Even her wedding gown was presented as a gift by New Creations, with earnest wishes for her happiness. Later on, of course, New Creations hoped to cash in on being the first designers in the world to gown a Venusian woman for her wedding. Somehow this cheapening of our romance rather sickened me.

So we were married, and to please her we honeymooned in the blazing heat of Teheran, on the Persian Gulf. We were away a month and then returned to the home I had had prepared in the meantime. It stood some ten miles out of the city. For the first time it seemed as if we might be able to shake off the fetters of those people who meant well and yet were actually a damned nuisance.

I began to assess matters. Our lives together had really begun now. My executive position in the city was assured: I had seen to that. We had two servants in the house to attend to our every want. Lucia would not need to soil her fingers with any drudgery; instead, she could expand her talents and do whatever she wanted. As far as I could see, I had done all any husband could do. Yet she seemed to smile less frequently now. Inwardly, I was trouble at the strange, half-frightened expression I sometimes glimpsed on her face.

"Lucia," I asked her quietly as we sat in the garden one evening in the mellow summer twilight, "is there something wrong? Is it that you're not happy?"

Her big tawny eyes turned to me and she smiled faintly.

"With you, Jeff, I could always be happy. It's just that—that I feel so utterly . . . lost!"

For a moment she was silent, staring into the sky. Her lips were parted in eager excitement and I followed her line of vision in some surprise. Far out to the west over the amber of the sunset was a solitary, gleaming planet.

"Yes," I told her quietly, "it's Venus."

She smiled—a wistful smile that had the quality of intolerable longing. I could almost see into her mind's eye and picture her wandering mentally through the torrid jungles or across the windswept foothills of Half-Way Mountains. . . . The evening deepened into night as she sat gazing at that solitary glowing point of her homeland. Then at last she shivered, though the air was warm.

"I think I'll go inside," she said. "It's cold out here." She left me, ghostlike in the gloom, making no sounds. I said no word and was left alone, staring up into the night sky. For some reason I kept thinking of what Dr. Baythorp had said. When I went into the house Lucia was nowhere to be seen and I learned from the maid that she had gone to bed. It was only a little after ten, so I spent an hour reading and smoking before I followed Lucia upstairs. When I got into the bedroom I found her lying fully clothed on the bed, her slim shoulders quivering with the effort of sobbing.

"Lucia!" I sat down beside her immediately, drew her into my arms. "Lucia, sweetheart, whatever's wrong? What did I do to you? What did anybody do?"

The tears were wet on her lashes as she looked at me. Her lips were quivering.

"You—you didn't do anything." She shook her head slowly. "Everybody's so kind to me—that's why it's so awful! I don't know why I'm unhappy, but I am. Oh, Jeff, I'm so dreadfully frightened—so alone—and I don't know *why!*"

For a long time she sat with her head buried on my shoulder, crying and talking by turns. I held her to me, frowning and wondering. At last I spoke.

"You're simply suffering from the transition to this life from your old one. Nothing more. It happens sometimes even when only moving from one town to another. . . . We call it nostalgia. That means home-sickness, a longing for one's own people and birthplace."

"Yes, perhaps that's it," she whispered, looking at me again. "I do so want to be happy with you, Jeff, because I love you so, and your world, terrifying though it is sometimes. . . . I'll try to like it, to understand it—somehow. I am your wife and you've the right to expect me to behave as such, instead of like a spoilt baby—I'll try! I really will!"

"Of course you will. . . ." I stroked her silvery hair gently. "And the best way to forget yourself is to use those gifts you have. You must write and paint and play. . . . That will bring you in contact with others. There'll be no more loneliness, no more longings. In time you'll settle down."

"Yes," she said, low voice. "In time, dear one. . . ."

CERTAINLY Lucia made a tremendous effort after her attack of nostalgia. She apparently became happier and immersed herself in the three arts over which she had such complete command. When I returned home from the city in the evenings I would either find her painting a genuine masterpiece on a giant canvas in the quiet room she had taken over for a studio, or else she would be sitting writing. At other times I encountered the crashing chords of the grand piano, rolling out some fantastic, breath-taking diapason of melody. *How* she could play!

To a great extent these pursuits seemed to calm her. Her talents soon brought her into constant demand among friends and public alike. Her paintings attracted the notice of wealthy buyers and netted her a small fortune. On the other hand, her writing was so startlingly arresting that, without any effort, she wrote three best sellers in a row in the space of two months!

Yet the money she made, making my own finances seem like a child's savings by comparison, failed to interest her in the least. She smiled, she was lovable, ethereal—fascinating, yet somehow her eyes were always looking far away.

Then Miranti, the great Italian impresario, chanced to be at a gathering to which Lucia and I had been invited. He heard her play and went into ecstacies. Almost without realising it, she was launched on a musical career. Naturally, my business tying me, I saw less of her than hitherto, but on those occasions when she did come home I found her unspoiled by success—still like a fairy, a gossamer-being, becoming, I felt sure, even more fragile than when she had first attracted my notice in the wastes of Venus. Her eyes seemed larger and her face smaller. There was a touch of the languid in her movements, too, which I couldn't altogether understand.

Then one evening, when she was away on a concert tour at the other end of the country, old Dr. Baythorp turned up. He was just back from a Mars-Venus trip, as taciturn and solid as ever, with his evil-smelling pipe more aggressive than usual.

Over the drinks in the lounge he looked at me critically.

" You married a brilliant woman, Jeff," he commented. " Seems to have made herself famous."

" How can she help but do so?" I smiled with the pride natural to a husband who has a clever wife. " She's a genius, Doc—a genius with the heart of a child. It's odd, really, to think of a girl with so fantastic and wild a soul having such lavish gifts."

" Fantastic and wild is right," he said, studying his drink. " I wonder if you have noticed something —well, *odd,* about her three gifts?"

" Odd?"

" I heard her most recent concert—made a point of it. She played her own compositions. They're astounding, soul-moving, but they are reflections of spirit and heart. She's a prisoner, lad, a soul drowning in a constricting world! Into her music she pours all the longing and futility she feels herself. Her fingers bring into magic actuality the Half-Way Mountains, the overpowering jungles, the hot winds of Venus. They are in her mind all the time. She's on Earth, I know, and she's your wife, but—her real being is on the world where she was born. Remember . . . I warned you of that."

" She's happy enough," I said, thinking.

" Is she?" Baythorp looked at me frankly. " Have you studied her paintings in the gallery? I have. They're fantastic—overloaded with tumbled concepts, the expressions once again of a fettered soul. And her books! Stories of people struggling vainly for existence against impossible odds. In every way, lad, she shows that she is fighting a losing battle against herself. . . . For your sake she is trying to prove herself mistress over an intolerable situation. But it won't work out. It never *can* work out. I believe two people of different worlds can never be entirely one in the sense that is really implied by marriage."

" Doc, I think you're off your course," I said, smiling. " I know that Lucia is—— Pardon me." I broke off as the visiphone rang.

I went over to it and to my surprise it was the manager of the concert hall on long distance. His voice, reedy with miles, spoke the most incredible words.

". . . I think it would be as well if you'd come right away, Mr. Haslam. I hardly like to say this, but your wife is—is hopelessly intoxicated! She can't play. Else she is ill, but I'd say . . . drunk."

The rest of his words blurred off so that I hardly heard them. I think I said I'd come immediately. Then, as I was putting the visiphone back I saw Doc. Baythorp's expectant face.

" Lucia is . . . intoxicated," I managed to say mechanically.

He looked at me, seemed to reflect, then he put down his glass and rose from the chair.

" Where is she? The Avalon Concert Hall?"

" Yes, at the other end of the country. I can get a 'plane."

" Then I'll come with you. Probably I can help."

So we flew through the night and landed at our destination some time after midnight. A much harassed manager who had awaited our coming showed us into a dressing-room, where we found Lucia stretched full length on a couch, dressed in her concert gown. She was playing with a lace handkerchief and giggling to herself ever and again.

" Lucia, what on earth's the matter?" I knelt beside her, put an arm behind her shoulders and raised her up.

" Nothin' in the world," she shrugged, running her words into one another. " Just that, for the fi'st time I'm really happy. . . ."

Doc. Baythorp leaned forward, studying her keenly.

"They wouldn't let me play," she went on, sighing. "An' jus' when I felt in the mood too——"

"She isn't intoxicated, Jeff," Baythorp interrupted sharply. "Off hand I'd say she's—gassed. No smell of drink, either."

"Gassed!" I stared at him. "But how can she be——?"

"Let's get her home," he said.

I nodded and Lucia got to her feet, but almost instantly her knees gave way. She would have fallen full length on the floor had I not caught her. I scooped up her light body in my arms and bore her outside to the waiting taxi.

She still giggled to herself as we were whisked to the airport, and now and again she broke into snatches of song. To me all this was distressing—embarrassing even, but to Doc. Baythorp it seemed to be a matter of profound interest. He kept his eyes on her, his professional instincts aroused. All I noticed was Lucia's dead white face—as it always was—and the unusual brightness of her yellow eyes. The pupils had dilated so much they had nearly swallowed the irises.

WHEN we got her home Baythorp saw that she went straight to bed. I didn't stay while he made his examination, preferring instead to walk up and down the lounge and wait for him. When finally he reappeared his face was troubled.

"Well?" I asked him in a hushed voice.

"I was right." He tapped his fingers restlessly on the table top. "She's gassed. Atmospheric gas, I mean. Just as an aviator who goes too high suffers from mental black-out and intoxication from lowered air pressure, so your wife has got the same thing. It has taken several weeks in her case to make itself noticeable, because the change is produced by an alteration in the bloodstream, there being less oxygen in it than there normally should be for a Venusian. The result is extreme giddiness and all the symptoms of intoxication. You see, Jeff, the air of Venus is about twelve and a half per cent. denser than Earth's, and that poor girl is just realising it!"

"Then what happens now?" I asked, my mouth dry.

"I've given her an injection which will gradually balance the missing oxygen ingredient in her bloodstream. She will then become normal again—but if she is to stay on Earth with you she will have to take an injection without fail every twenty-four hours. If at any time she fails to do so coma and death may result."

I was silent, stunned by the thought of her being chained for evermore to a preventative against death.

"In the bedroom you'll find the injector and the stuff itself," Baythorp said. "It's up to you to see that my orders are carried out. In case you don't know it, lad, Lucia is a white mouse—the first inhabitant of another world to come to Earth. From her sufferings we can learn what to avoid in future."

"She isn't going to suffer!" I snapped. "She deserves all that is best and beautiful in life, and she's going to get them. As soon as she's better I'll take her back to Venus where she belongs."

He sighed. "You can try. . . . The chances are that her heart and constitution are weakened a good deal. You see, at a lesser air pressure the heart works more swiftly, as hers must have been doing ever since she arrived here. That may account for her incredible genius, which is far in excess of what it was on Venus. The faster the flow of blood through the brain the more stimulated the brain is. . . . I really think that space travel on top of her present physical trouble would——"

Baythorp stopped and shrugged. "Don't think of it yet, anyway. We'll see how she goes on. I'll be in the city for a fortnight before I'm due off again. If anything goes wrong send for me right away—the Apex Hotel."

I hardly heard him leave. All I was conscious of at that moment was my own damnable selfishness and Lucia's superb courage. For weeks, as Baythorp had said, she must have been battling against impossible odds, trying to fit herself into a foreign environment. And I had kept her beside me. Why? Because I loved her, because I was proud of her, because I liked Earth better than Venus—because I had been too infernally egotistical to realise that, torn from her home planet, she was like a tropical flower trying to acclimatise itself to frost.

I went upstairs and found her lying flat on her back in bed, staring at the ceiling. On the little table were the injector and bottle of fluid Baythorp had made up.

"Lucia . . ." I caught at her limp hand. "Lucia, sweetheart, this is all my fault. I should have realised . . ."

She turned her face slowly towards me, smiling wistfully.

"It isn't anybody's fault, Jeff." Her voice was gentle and unaccusing. "Dr. Baythorp told me everything—why it is that I feel as though everything is whizzing round me like a Half-Way Mountain cyclone. Something to do with atmospheric pressure. . . . Yours is a terrible world, dearest."

She closed her eyes and I saw the wet glint of tears on her long lashes.

Sitting down on the bed beside her, I didn't speak again. I remained holding her hand until she fell into a restful sleep—then I moved over to a chair and for the rest of that night I kept on the alert to attend to her slightest wish.

DR. BAYTHORP'S antidote did the trick. When she awoke Lucia was normal, as far as her intoxication was concerned anyway—but she seemed spiritless and she remained unsmiling.

Naturally I had my business to attend to, but the only thought in my mind was for her, and I returned home early in the evening. I found her coiled up on the window seat in the lounge, ghostly

and silent, her great yellow eyes gazing out across the lawn. As I came in she turned and I could tell her smile was only produced by sheer effort.

"Everything all right?" I asked, trying to sound cheerful.

She shook her head, and with a shock I noticed that the sheen had gone from her silvery hair. It was dull . . . drab.

"Come and look at what I've done," she whispered, taking my hand—and, wonderingly, I followed her into the room she used as a studio. With a tired wave of her arm she indicated one of her giant canvases. I stared at it unbelievingly. It was an incredible chaos of flowing paint streaks and eye-wrenching hues.

"I—I tried to paint one of my own home landscapes, just as I have so often done," she said. "But this is how it came out. . . . *I can't paint any more, Jeff!*"

"But—why not?" I studied her white face stupidly.

"I don't know. I've forgotten. My power of conception has gone. Besides, I—— Look here, too!"

She picked up a manuscript from the table and I glanced through it. The words were a jumble of meaningless nonsense. I let it fall from my hand to the table again.

"Jeff, what's the *matter* with me?" Her voice rose in sudden wild terror and her arms went about my neck in a desperate longing for protection. Troubled, I lifted her gently and bore her back into the lounge to the window seat.

"It'll pass," I kept on saying to her—without realising why I said it. "It's a hangover from last night, that's all."

She looked at me seriously. "Dearest, do you really think that, or do you know, in your heart of hearts, that——" She stopped, forcing back tears; then she got off the window seat and went over to the piano. "I still have this," she said, and began playing an unearthly melody which she had herself composed, "Breeze Across the Foothills," that abandoned, soul-stirring music which epitomised the wild glory of the foothills of Venus where she had been born and raised, until I——

Half way through the piece she stopped, pressed a hand to her forehead and got up from the stool uncertainly. Immediately I was at her side.

"You're out of bed too soon," I murmured. "Come along back upstairs. . . ."

She nodded weakly and again she was in my arms. She lay so heavily, so tiredly, I had a hard struggle to stifle back the gnawing fear at my heart. I knew I was watching her slide down the scale of life with diabolical swiftness, and I could do nothing to stop it!

The moment I had her in bed again I sent for Baythorp. He came from the city right away, and this time his examination took half an hour. When we faced each other downstairs he shook his head.

"Jeff, lad, if only you'd listened to me!" His voice was bitter. "This time the sun is the prime cause of the trouble. On Venus the sun never gets through and at least two of its radiations—which we experience all the time and are therefore immune against—are masked. On Earth here Lucia has had them beating down on her for over three months during this hot summer. The result is the same as if we had been exposed to naked cosmic rays. . . .

It's affected her brain, hence her inability to paint or write any more."

"Doc, you don't mean she's going to——"

"You can't defeat Nature, Jeff," he said moodily.

"Not die!" I shrieked. "No——!"

I raced out of the room and up the stairs. Lucia turned her head as I came in. I saw it now—the naked cruelty of approaching death on her wan face. Her eyes were wistful, still without reproach.

"I'm an awful nuisance, Jeff, aren't I?" she murmured.

"Lucia, we can't be separated like this! Nature can't *do* that to us! We love each other so. . . ."

I put my arms round her, held her tight. Her slender little body hardly stirred in my arms.

"Jeff . . ." Her voice was dim and far away. "Jeff, I'm a white mouse, aren't I? Dr. Baythorp said so. Other Venusian women won't go through this hell. I'm blazing the trail for them. It's been worth it—if only to know your love for me. But oh, dearest, how I long for home, for my beloved wild landscape, the great trees, the flowers, the hot winds, the soft daylight and moonless nights. Perhaps I'll be there again—soon."

I could not speak. My voice was choked.

"Jeff, open the window, please. I—I can't breathe properly. . . ."

I stumbled over to it and swung it wide. It was nearing twilight now. A warm breeze set the curtains flowing.

"Play to me. . . ." I could hardly hear Lucia's voice as she lay with her eyes closed. "Play 'Breeze Across the Foothills' please!"

"Yes," I whispered. "All right."

I went downstairs blindly and to the piano. Doc. Baythorp stood looking at me morosely. I could hardly see the music score for tears, and I am not a good player either—but for Lucia's sake I did my best. For ten minutes I sent those wild, unearthly chords crashing through the house. Then I could stand it no longer.

In the dead silence after the last note had echoed away I fled from the room and upstairs.

"Lucia!" I cried, bursting in on her. "Did you hear it——?"

She was silent. A wistful smile was fixed on her small mouth. Her eyes were wide open, unblinking. Stupidly I followed their direction towards the open window, where the curtains stirred restlessly.

Over the sunset was a star, a glowing planet, brilliant and alone.

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