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ELIXIR of DOOM

By RAY CUMMINGS

THRILLING WONDER STORIES

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CHAPTER I

The Flower Box

In the fourth sector of the North Atlantic Airway, the westbound night plane with mail and fifty passengers was in trouble. A fuel leak had been discovered.

"We'll drop down on Pontoon Four," the chief pilot said. "Won't delay us much."

"Queer," the radio man said, "I can't get a word out of Somers and Alden."

Pontoon 4 lay glistening in the moonlight. A little emergency landing field, fifty by a hundred and fifty feet. A metal raft, raised on its pontoons, alone here in the Atlantic. The moonlight gleamed on its flat metal expanse.

At one end was a small metal shed—the supply house. At the other, close against the low-railed side of the raft, stood the little cottage where the pontoon-keepers lived. There were two of them—two young Americans: Roy Somers and George Alden.

The cottage was a single-story structure entirely of metal—silver-glistening alumite. This night of June 20th, 1945, was calm. The sea was placid. The officers and passengers of the distressed air-liner gazed down at the somnolent empty pontoon. Its beacon lights were burning. The windows of the little cottage glowed with yellow illumination from within.

But where were Roy Somers and George Alden? They should have answered the radio call.

"Very queer," the radio man said. "There ought to be more than Somers and Alden here. Only an hour ago I had a message from the eastbound plane. It stopped here. Put off two passengers—relatives of Alden."

An hour ago, nothing had been wrong here. The London-bound flyer had brought old Professor Alden and his daughter Anne from New York. They were George Alden's father and sister who were to spend a few days on the pontoon visiting him. And the chief pilot of that other plane had reported something else.

Shortly after leaving the pontoon, a passenger was found to be missing. One José Toro, who had come aboard at New York. He was booked through to London—but evidently he had left the ship at the pontoon.

Very strange. Five people unaccounted for. The pilots searched the pontoon. They got their fuel from the storehouse. There was no sign of disorder. Nothing wrong. They searched the little metal cottage. Its door had a smashed lock. Nothing else was wrong. The few small interior rooms showed no signs of violence. The luggage of Professor Alden and his daughter stood as mute evidence that the guests had arrived.

The officers of the mail plane reported the condition of Pontoon 4 by radio to New York and to London; and in ten minutes, they departed.

When they were gone, Pontoon 4 still lay silent and deserted. Drama had been here—tragedy doubtless—but it was over now.

But was it? On the floor of the kitchen, under the low southern window, stood a little flower box. It was a box only a foot wide, two feet long, and hardly six inches deep. Soil was in it. A geranium flowered at its center. It seemed to have been neglected. Was only recently watered.

Nothing of tragedy and drama going on here now? No sign of life here on this deserted metal raft? Here in the flower box a little sign of life showed: an ant, in one corner, wandered disconsolately over the dirt, looking for food. But what of that? Anyone, here now staring at the little flower box, would have concluded that there was nothing to see!

Fatuous reasoning! Who ever thinks of the amazing realms of smallness always under our eyes, teeming always with drama and tragedy?

This little flower box, for instance....

An hour and a half before the distressed westbound flyer landed at Pontoon 4 and found it deserted, Roy Somers sat with George Alden in the kitchen of their metal house. Alden had just come from his radio instrument in the adjoining room.

"The eastbound plane is landing here," Alden said. "Roy, what do you think—father and Anne coming to spend a day or two!" His face was flushed, his dark eyes sparkled.

The big blond-haired Somers was excited. "Good Lord, what news! Your father and Anne—"

Somers could think only of Anne. Coming here now. Anne, who through all the lonely days and nights was so constantly in his thoughts.

"In ten or fifteen minutes," Alden said. "What a surprise! Get busy, Roy—got to get this place slicked up."

The plane from New York landed swiftly, discharged Professor Alden and Anne; and quickly departed. To Somers it was like a dream, having Anne here.

He clung to her hands. A small, slim, dark-haired girl; her face, like his, was flushed.

"Roy—you're hurting my hands—"

He released her hands in confusion, and turned to her father. Professor Alden was a small, frail, grey-haired man in his sixties—thin and wiry, like his son George. Somers picked up the suitcases; but there was one small satchel which the professor insisted on carrying himself.

"I'll tell you about it later," he said. "A discovery of mine."

Anne began cooking supper. The professor and his son crossed the raft to inspect the supply house. Somers joined them. But after a minute or two, he wanted to be back with Anne. He left them unceremoniously, recrossed the metal field in the moonlight and approached the little metal cottage.

The door was closed. Strange. He had left it open just a few moments before. Then he was stricken by the sound of a voice. Not Anne's voice.

"And I am here. I want to be with you."

The voice of José Toro. Somers recognized its suave, Spanish accent. He had met this Toro. A young Latin-American chemist who, in New York, was Professor Alden's assistant. Somers had never liked him. For one thing, he was far too attentive to Anne.

"But, José, I thought you were on the plane—going on to London—"

"But I got off. There is something—"

A sudden jealousy had made Somers pause by the door. There was a small hallway inside, beyond which was the kitchen. Anne and Toro evidently were there. The voices were muffled by the closed metal door, but still they were plainly audible.

"José—" The girl obviously was startled. "José—let me go!"

Anne was almost screaming with terror. The house had several windows, all of which were open. Somers leaped for one of them. The heavy metal hurricane blind came snapping down in his face. And all the others slid closed simultaneously—all of them electrically operated from a switch inside the house.

And there was Toro's muffled voice: "Stop fighting, you little fool! *Dios!* I do not want to hurt you—"

Back at the door, Somers frantically pounded, lunging against it; but it resisted all his efforts. And the metal window blinds were the same. The little house was impregnable.

Mingled with Anne's screams of protest, again came Toro's voice: "Adventure for you and me, eh, *niña?* No one can catch us now!"

To the raging Somers the voice seemed to have a new quality. Softer. Dimmer.

Behind Somers, young Alden and the professor came dashing up, breathless.

"That fellow Toro," Somers gasped. "Here—inside here, with Anne—" The voices inside were steadily growing fainter. "Get a crowbar, George! We'll break the door—"

It seemed an eternity while they waited, and Somers raged and plunged at the resisting door. Then, within a minute, young Alden came rushing back with the heavy iron bar.

The voices inside were very much dimmer now—queerly far away in sound. But they could not escape from the sealed metal house. Somers thought that, triumphantly, as he seized the crowbar and bashed in the door lock with a single blow.

They rushed inside. It seemed to Somers that just then he heard Anne's faint terrified cries. But the place was empty!

Somers dashed through the rooms. "Anne," he called, "where are you?" He dashed from one little room to the other. Searching frantically.

The sealed house was empty!

In the kitchen, the trembling Professor Alden straightened from the floor. His small satchel was in his hand. He set it on the table. It was open. Somers saw rows of tiny metal vials, some red, some white.

"He has stolen some of my drugs—my great discovery—" the professor said.

Somers and Alden stood gasping, listening. Amazing, diabolical plot of this José Toro. Amazing thing of science, this which now the professor was so vehemently telling.

As the professor's assistant, Toro had helped for the past two years in the old man's chemical researches. Revolutionary research, successfully ending with an amazing discovery. A drug to shrink every tiny atom of the human body cells. To reduce in size every atom of any living organism. Uniform dwindling, so that the shape, the identity of the complex cell agglomerations remained unchanged—and only the bulk was altered.

The professor gasped out his astounding secret as with trembling fingers he searched his satchel of vials. A drug for reducing the mass of a living organism. And a drug which was its opposite: to increase the mass—increase the bulk.

Incredible thing. Somers stood confused. Incredible? Yet it explained this disappearance of Anne and Toro. Incredible fantasy? Yet here it was! Somers' mind tried to encompass it. Anne and the villainous Toro had been here, but now they were gone!

"But they're not gone!" Professor Alden was saying. "They're right here, of course. Gone from us, in size—but right here—somewhere. We'll have to take the drug. Make ourselves small—find them—somewhere here—" The professor's hands shook as he gripped his little vials. "Roy—George, that's what Anne and I came to tell you. I thought we might make an experiment here. I've never yet tried this with a human. Only with insects—"

He held one of the red, and one of the white vials. "The red—for dwindling. We must hurry. They'll be gone so far into smallness—"

He suddenly checked himself. Somers saw an expression of horror sweep his face. On the floor there was a sound of scratching. The rasp and scuttling of insect feet, unnaturally loud.

For an instant the three men stood chilled with horror. They saw the thing now—an oblong black thing down on the floor of the room, over by the window. The bright light from the overhead electric bulb illumined it clearly.

An ant, six inches long! It stood belligerent on its bent legs.

The professor's voice broke the tense silence. "He—Toro—must have dropped a pellet of the enlarging drug! This ant—licking at it—don't you realize?"

It seemed to Somers that his heart stopped beating. The ant was visibly enlarging, swifter always, as though every

moment its rate of growth was accelerating. Its multiple eyes glared. It reared erect.

"Roy! Kill it!" The old professor was terrified into a panic of confusion.

The thing eluded them. Long, glistening, black shape, pinched in the middle like an hour-glass. It disappeared through the broken outer door—out to the moonlit expanse of the pontoon.

"Roy—my God, Roy—George!"

Somers and young Alden leaped past the white-faced old man. At the outer doorway all three paused. The professor gasped.

"We've got to kill it! Can't let it swim away—escape—It will devastate the world!"

Out in the moonlight, near the center of the glistening metal landing field, the hideous thing stood poised. Only an ant! Somers stood with cold horror clutching at his heart. The damnable thing was growing larger.... What would its size in an hour be? Swimming the ocean—reaching shore. A monster, with no limit to its growth—perhaps....

Again the ant reared itself erect. Its eyes glowed phosphorescent in the moonlight. And then it dropped horizontally. Belligerent with the realization of its size, it came scuttling forward!

CHAPTER II

The Fight with the Ant

To Somers, the brief terrifying combat was a fantasy of horror. He was aware of the hideous thing advancing. Enormous insect now. It advanced, lusting to seize these upright enemies who stood regarding it.

Somers heard the professor give a terrified cry and dart sideward. But young Alden jumped forward. The ant reared to meet him. They grappled; and Alden toppled backward; fell, with the ant down upon him.

Somers reached for the heavy iron crowbar with which he had bashed in the cottage door. He seized it; leaped forward just as young Alden fell.

And Somers swung the iron bar. It struck the huge black-shelled body. There was a sickening, mashing crack, a noisome stench of sticky white ooze. The back of the giant ant was broken; its pinched middle sagged; its whole mangled length writhed.

With his senses reeling, Somers stooped and jerked the fallen young Alden away.

The insect lay writhing as though in a death agony. Young Alden had rolled away and was climbing to his feet. Somers had dropped the iron bar. He turned and picked it up to strike again.

Too late! Amazing strength of this ant—strongest living thing of its size in all the world! It reared its mashed and mangled body. It seemed gigantically to leap with its broken legs. Somers' head reeled; he was barely aware of what was happening. He saw Professor Alden standing nearby—the huge, mangled insect leaping upon the old man—seizing him—bearing him away!

Somers and young Alden all at once found themselves futilely, despairingly in pursuit. The giant ant held the old man's body aloft, and with it, scuttled and lurched across the moonlit metal surface. The professor screamed—a brief scream of agony.

Somers flung the bar. It struck the ant; mashed it again. Doubtless now the thing was dying, or dead. But the momentum of its huge body and the blow of the bar slid it forward. The low guard rail of the pontoon was near at hand.

The noisome, gigantic mass of shell and pulp, still gripping its victim, slid and crashed through the guard rail; vanished over the edge. There was a drop of thirty feet to the placid moonlit sea. A silent interval of horror; then one final splash.

"Tough, George!" Somers murmured. "He's done for. We've forgotten Anne—Got to do something!"

They turned and ran. To Somers came the irrational thought that now, in the kitchen, they would seize this damnable José Toro.... But sight of the empty room brought Somers to his senses. How could he seize Toro, and rescue Anne? Yet they were here, somewhere. Frantically, he and Alden poked about the little room.

But there was nothing to see; and only silence responded to their frantic calls. Silence—and the tramp of their own footsteps; the grind as they shifted chairs and tables, and the faint lap of the calm ocean against the walls of the pontoon.

A sudden thought struck Somers which turned him cold with horror. He gripped his companion.

"My God, George—we can't do this! We'll trample them if they're here—small—under our feet—"

They stood transfixed, almost afraid to move. Somers tried to reason what must have happened.

This José Toro, with his unwelcome attentions to Anne ... Toro had known Professor Alden's secret of the drugs. Toro had left the plane, hidden himself on the pontoon. Watching his chance, he had got into the house, stolen the drugs and the girl—taken her into the realm of smallness.

But where were they now? What part of the room? Alden was tremblingly opening the satchel of drugs.

"Two vials missing—it looks like that," he said. "These others—red and white—father said the red ones for smallness, didn't he?"

Somers remembered it. Each seized two of the vials. Alden locked the satchel again. Somers opened his small red bottle. A score of tiny red pellets were inside. But how many were they to take?

They could only guess. One perhaps, for normal shrinkage. They decided to take only one each, at first. And add others later.

But as they became small, in which part of the kitchen would they search? Somers' mind tried to envisage the coming experience, and it set him gasping. Why, to a human, tiny in size, this kitchen would be expanded into a gigantic realm. One might run across the floor, and be minutes reaching the opposite wall. Minutes? Why, if one were small enough, it might be a day's journey!

A vast realm of smallness here, with Toro and Anne wandering in it!

Then Somers thought of something else. Toro must have dropped a pellet of the enlarging drug. That ant had eaten some of it.... The ant—what was an ant doing in this metal kitchen—on the metal pontoon in the middle of the Atlantic?

The little flower box!

Somers cried, "I know where they may have gone—"

Alden knelt with him on the floor, beside the flower box. The overhead light shone strong upon it. "Look, Roy! Look!" Alden murmured.

Amazing sight! Down there, on the caked dirt, half hidden by the tiny fuzz of growth, two little figures were plainly visible. Toro—and Anne! He was carrying her inert body in his arms!

Tiny human figures. A quarter of an inch high—no more! Toro carrying Anne. Struggling laboriously through the growth of grass blades.

Dwindling figures! Already they were smaller than a moment before. The grass, far taller than Toro's head, almost hid them. A vague instinct made Somers reach down. But he checked himself. Powerless! How could he seize that tiny human form, no bigger than an ant? His descending hand suddenly seemed monstrous; his thumb and forefinger were incapable of grasping the minute figures.

Breathlessly he and Alden crouched, stared down. Toro's threading advance had moved the grass blades, but now he was too small for that. He staggered with Anne's body, moving between the blades without touching them. Was Anne dead? Somers could not think so, for the fleeing Toro then would have abandoned her. She had fainted, probably.

Then he knew that Anne was not dead. The drugs were effective on living organisms only—and Anne's body now was dwindling equally with her captor's. Toro came out of the grass. So small! A eighth of an inch high? Certainly no more than that! And it seemed that, as Somers bent lower to look, Toro was gazing up, with a waving arm in gesture of defiance.

Almost invisible now. Somers blinked. He heard Alden mutter, "Gone!"

"No. Still there!" Somers was almost sure he saw the tiny moving speck which was Toro—and the pinpoint dot of Anne's blue-white dress. There was a tiny, ridged crack in the caked dirt—smaller than one would make with the scratch of a fingernail. It seemed that the moving specks had dropped into it—vanished.

Somers breathed again. And then he tensed. "George," he murmured, "give me a match. I don't dare look away. I don't dare!"

Somers continued to stare at the spot. His groping hand took the match from Alden. Then he bent lower and very carefully stuck the match upright into the dirt, a half or three-quarters of an inch from where Anne had disappeared. Carefully he memorized the direction.

Two pellets? Would that dwindle them quickly enough?

He stood with Alden, both of them pale and tense. They held the pellets ready. Somers nodded to Alden and simultaneously they swallowed the drug.

Somers instinctively closed his eyes. He was conscious of an instant sweetish, queerly aromatic taste in his mouth. His senses reeled with a dizzying swoop....

CHAPTER III

Descent into Smallness

Somers opened his eyes. The sense of swooping dizziness persisted for a moment, and then clarified into a semblance of normality. He found Alden clinging to him.

"You all right, Roy?"

"Yes. Only I feel a queer tingling sensation."

They were seated together on the kitchen floor, with upraised knees and feet drawn close to their bodies. The little flower box was in front of them. To one side were the legs of the kitchen table, with its level top above their heads. Suddenly they were conscious that the whole scene was in motion!

The walls, the ceiling—everything in the kitchen seemed to be slowly shifting. A queer, steady, crawling change. Slow at first, like the hands of a clock whose movement is barely perceptible. But the change was obvious. Everything was expanding.

And the movement was not only visual. They could feel it now. The floor was crawling outward under them. It drew their feet out, so that their knees shifted down with tiny jerks. They had to hitch themselves into new positions to maintain balance.

Amazing—but after a moment they found the physical strangeness passing.

They stood up, clinging together with the floor shifting under their feet—pulling their feet apart so that every moment they had to take a step inward. And the movement was accelerating.

A weird change was taking place. The table legs were huge. The table top was higher than their heads. The flower box seemed to have doubled its size; and it was no longer near them. Six feet away now, and shifting, crawling steadily further into the expanding distance.

Somers laughed grimly. "Got to keep our wits—not get rattled."

"Yes, I think we'd better go over there."

They started walking. The sensation was strange, but in a moment they got used to it. Six feet to the flower box? They took a few steps. But the box was drawing away. They ran. The wall of the box was at their shoulders when they reached it. A shoulder-high green fence.

They scrambled up over it, tumbled in a heap onto the dirt. Somers saw, some six feet away, a round white pole sticking up, waist-high. The match! Another few feet beyond it would be the place where Anne had gone.

"Mustn't go there yet!" Somers warned. "We're too big. Might trample her."

For a moment they stood, with the waist-high grass blades expanding around them. From the edge of the box, there was a drop of thirty or forty feet. The kitchen tabletop was a monstrous plateau a quarter of a mile away and high in the sky.

Sky? No—the wide expanse of ceiling was still visible as a blur above them—an expanding, fading blur. The electric light bulb up there was a distant spot of white glare.

How long they stood engrossed, Somers did not realize. Then he swung about; his heart pounded with alarm. The white match-stick was a great pole eighteen or twenty feet high. And it was thirty or forty feet away. Beyond it, very distant over the huge grass fronds, a great towering shape was visible.

Somers moved to where, between the twenty-foot leaves of the grass, he would see that towering shape clearly. A crooked pillar of brown-green, towering up hundreds of feet to a blurred mass of red.

The geranium. A lake of muddy water was at its bottom.

Alden, too, was staring in amazement. And suddenly he was gripping Somers.

"Things moving! My God, you see them?"

The world of the flower box!

Steadily, with a constant acceleration, it was opening up. And there were things alive here, of course. With a trembling hand, Alden was pointing at the expanding tower of the geranium-stem. Things alive on it? They were too far away now to be distinguished clearly. But undoubtedly there were moving, living beings.

A new world here. And in it, time was lost—size was lost. Size and distance always changing. Everything growing swiftly gigantic—and moving away into newly created realms of distance.

Then, suddenly, Somers became aware of the match-stick again. It was a gleaming white column now. It towered two hundred feet into the blue-white blur of sky. And it was at least four hundred feet away over the tumbled expanse of dirt and rock!

Somers went cold. The column was receding so fast! Could they reach it?

Somers ran, with his companion floundering after him. Four hundred feet? He knew he had run that far, but still the gigantic white column loomed ahead. Then, panting, almost winded, they reached it; ran around its huge curving side.

"This way," Somers panted. "Toward the geranium!"

The geranium plant was only a blur in the distance with a gleaming radiance shining upon the watery expanse at its base. Somers headed toward it. Another desperate run.

Amazing realms of smallness—miles of rocky cragstrewn waste, ridged and pitted—little gullies opening. They leaped over them. They stumbled, fell—picked themselves up, and ran on.

"Roy—wait—I can't—I'm all out of breath."

Somers stopped. Despair was in his heart. They had waited too long. They could never reach that crack.

Alden came panting up. "Take it easy. We've got to keep together."

"We've got to reach that crack!"

Alden smiled grimly. "If we're too small, we can get larger, you know. No need of all this running," he added.

Both realized that the tumbled area of rocky distance had lost its movement. The drug's action had worn off.

They peered into the half light. Rocks were strewn here now. Gigantic green stalks rose into the sky behind them: the grass blades. Memory came to Somers. This was the place where Toro had stood, carrying Anne!

"Roy—look off there!"

Somers followed the gesture. A mile or two away, the rocky ground suddenly burst upward. An earthquake—a monstrous cataclysm! It shook them, with the rocks shuddering under their feet. A distant upheaval. The ground rising as though by a vast explosion. Yet it was a slow upheaval. A pushing upward. A mountain of earth rising a hundred or two hundred feet into the air, and falling back into a huge tumbled litter of broken rock.

The roar of it came echoing from the distance—a queer, crashing roar, blurred and muffled.

They stood gazing, transfixed. The earth had been pushed upward by a monster coming up from underground. A mile or two away—but still they could see the gigantic shape. Was it a reptile from the prehistoric ages—a monstrous serpent hundreds of feet long?

They could see it slithering, twisting, coiling itself, then lengthening out, moving away until in a moment it had vanished.

White-faced, Somers turned to his companion. He tried to laugh. The tension of his taut nerves made him feel suddenly hysterical.

"George, do you know what that was?"

"My God, no!"

"A worm, wriggling up through the loose dirt! A worm—in the flower box!"

Astonishing aspects of size! Size to govern one's viewpoint of everything! That monster, only a miserable little worm. Why, here in the vial of drugs in his pocket was his ability to get large again—to change that distant fearsome monster back into a harmless, wriggling little worm!

Somers felt into his pockets to make sure that the vials were safe. He recalled the professor's brief words concerning his drugs; an aura which they flung about the living organism they were altering—an aura like a magnetic field, so that his clothing and the small articles in his pockets were within its influence. Yes, the vials were safe!

He laughed grimly. "We've sure got to keep our wits, George. This can be handled better than we're doing it!"

They were planning to take some of the enlarging drug. And then they saw what was obviously the crack into which Anne and Toro had vanished. It showed now as a yawning shadow across the landscape, about a quarter of a mile away.

"Come on," Somers said. "Easier to walk there than to take any more of the drug."

They started. Somers was pondering what procedure Toro might have followed. One dose of the drug would have worn off now. Had Toro taken more?

They came to the crack. Stood awed. It was a long, broken gully. A great ridge of upflung earth was here on the plateau of its upper brink. They stood on the tumbled summit, gazing down.

"If they went down there," Somers said dubiously, "I suppose we ought to climb down."

The descent did not take them long. They stood presently on the gully floor, with the broken walls towering above them. The twilight was deeper here. The sky was a ribbon of grey-blue haze.

Silent, rocky desolation. Their low voices echoed with a queer, muffled quality.

"But where have they gone?" Alden was saying. "Roy, how can we ever find them?"

There were plenty of rocky recesses here where Toro might be hiding. Somers took a step; then checked himself, shuddering. Anne might be here at his feet—tiny as an ant. His gaze swept the stone-littered gully floor.

"George, what's that over there?" he said abruptly.

A little, crumpled white thing ten or fifteen feet away. They went and picked it up. It was a small square of white linen, smelling faintly of perfume. In its corner was a small embroidered "A."

Anne's handkerchief! Had she dropped it here by accident; or was it a trail which she purposely had left for them to follow?

"They were here," Somers said, "that's evident. I believe Anne dropped it purposely. She may have marked this spot here for us—to show that this is where they took the second dose of the drug."

They consulted. Then each took a second red pellet. The sensations were not so confusing this time. Crawling, shifting of the enlarging landscape. The handkerchief grew monstrous. A great billowing mass of white fabric. Presently it was higher than their heads. The strands were like plaited rope. The billowing folds were ten feet high. Then twenty feet.

"George! Look here!"

Alden was stooping. On the shifting ground which every moment was growing rougher, more broken, there lay a bent black wire. It was several feet long and rapidly enlarging.

One of Anne's hairpins! No mistaking it!

The trail into smallness! Brave little Anne. She had recovered from unconsciousness. She was alert now—leaving a trail for them to follow!

And the deduction of another fact was easy. This monstrous hairpin—in another moment it was longer than Somers' body—still was far smaller than normal compared to the gigantic, crumpled mass of the handkerchief. Anne and Toro had dwindled here. They had taken the second dose of the drug. And they were not moving very far in space, only in size.

"We must keep ourselves here," Somers said, "until this dose is worn off. I doubt if they'd take a third one."

Again he envisioned the enormity of smallness. This was only two pellets. With others, one might go down and down—into infinity. Every tiny widening crack here at his feet held new gigantic realms—if one were small enough to penetrate them. Every tiny grain of rock in this vast valley held a new universe of smallness.

At last the drug again wore off. Somers and Alden stood regarding a great, tumbled white hill. A thing indescribable. Billowing folds of shaggy white rope-strands woven into a titanic fabric. It stood piled into a huge mass fifty feet or so in height, with a spread of an acre or more. A score of entrances to the dark recesses under it were near at hand. Cave-mouth openings—and in one place a yawning oval ten feet high.

Somers and Alden stood peering into the inner darkness. Was the trail lost? There had been no other sign from Anne. Were she and Toro motionless now? Hiding somewhere here?

"I wonder," Somers said. "I just wonder—That cavern in there—"

From the yawning opening ahead there came a muffled scream. A cry of protest. Terror. Defiance!

Anne's voice!

With Alden after him, Somers dashed forward, plunging into the blackness of the cavern.

CHAPTER IV

Combat of Size

It had seemed dark under the vast, billowy folds of the handkerchief. But when he got inside, Somers was at once aware of light. A reflected sheen from the fabric itself; and a dim effulgence from the rocks. He had noticed it outside in the gully a while ago—a glowing, dim phosphorescence.

Swiftly he and Alden dashed forward, their eyes rapidly becoming accustomed to the softer light. The scream was not repeated.

"Quiet!" Somers murmured. "Got to locate them." He had stopped and stood clutching Alden. They listened, peering.

A glowing labyrinth here. Rounded, shelflike recesses in a dozen places of the cavern walls. And all of it plaited rope strands—so coarse a fabric that they could have climbed its rounded slopes.

No sound. Eerie, phosphorescent darkness....

"*Dios!* Give me that!"

Toro's voice! The sound of a scuffle. And then they saw Toro and Anne.

Two figures, seemingly of normal height. They were standing about fifty feet away, on a shelflike recess of the fabric wall some fifteen feet above the rocks. Toro, in white shirt and dark trousers; Anne in her pale-blue dress. Both mud-stained, with clothes torn by the journey.

They stood on the ledge, struggling—the man gripping her, cuffing her.

"*Dios!* Give me that!"

"I won't! Kill me if you like—I won't go any further!"

They had not yet seen their pursuers. Anne quite evidently had seized a vial of the drugs. He was trying to snatch it from her.

The realization came to Somers as he and Alden dashed forward. He was aware that, up there on the ledge, Anne had jerked loose her arm and flung something away. The vial of diminishing drug. It hurtled through the air and fell to the rocky floor.

Toro shouted an oath. And then he saw his oncoming enemies. Somers already had reached the slope which led to the ledge. He leaped upon the rough fabric, climbing it. Toro seemed stricken with astonishment. He stood defiant, thin, dark face livid with rage. His hand darted into his trousers pocket.

The vial of the enlarging drug! Fiendish triumph distorted his face as he swallowed a pellet. And abruptly Somers saw that he was growing. A slim Latin-American. But already he was six feet tall!

Alden was shouting: "After him! Kill him! I'll come with you! Don't let him escape, with that drug!"

In that second reason came to the stricken Somers. He fumbled in his pocket. The vial of enlarging drug! Take it quickly! Match this fellow in his growth!

And he swung and shouted at Alden: "You stay here! Take care of Anne! No—both of you get large—not so dangerous—but keep away from me! I'll fight him!"

Somers crammed two pellets into his mouth. A seven-foot Toro, leering with the triumph of his growing bulk, stood up there now. Then he turned, jumped backward down another slope, and vanished.

Somers' head had reeled from the drug, but almost at once the feeling passed. He was aware that the eerie, phosphorescent scene was shrinking. The fabric of ceiling was coming down; the walls closing in.

These closing walls! It startled Somers into a panic of confusion. He stood tense, clinging to the slope of the fabric. But its surface was smoothing; the spaces between the rope-strands were closing on his fingers. He could feel the surface bending under his weight.

And suddenly he slipped, saved himself from falling by a backward leap. He had thought it was a drop of nearly ten feet—but it seemed only two or three. He got his balance; stood wavering. On the dwindling rock-ground across the cavern lay Anne, with her brother holding her. Dwindling figures—already they were no longer than Somers' arm.

There was a blur of movement as Toro made a rush through a narrowing side-passage. Somers scrambled after him. The shrinking fabric walls scraped him as he wedged through. Panting, he got outside, turned and beheld the small tunnel-way through which he had emerged. It was hardly big enough for his hand.

"*Dios!* Got you now!"

He swung around as the figure of Toro leaped upon him. They grappled. Somers' mind was alert. Above everything he knew he must keep his wits. The shock of Toro's weight made him stagger backward. Purposely he went limp, sagged and fell, pulling his adversary down upon him. And then with a sudden lunge, twisted, and brought himself uppermost.

He found Toro perhaps a foot larger than himself. Stronger, undoubtedly. But both quite evidently had taken two of the pellets. It seemed that there was no relative change in Toro's size. He and Somers were enlarging with equal rapidity.

Somers found himself straddling Toro's chest. The fellow was lunging, squirming, flailing with his fists.

Around him, Somers was aware of the dizzying, swooping scene. All shrinking. Rocky walls of the valley lowering and closing. And almost at his side was a crumpled white handkerchief. He was gripping Toro's throat; and Toro, with his breath shut off, was choking, his eyes bulging.

But the sight of the shrinking handkerchief set Somers shuddering. It seemed, with that instant glance, that he saw the tiny figure of Alden, carrying Anne—trying to run.

Realization swept Somers. At any instant his leg, or the flailing legs of the prostrate Toro, might mangle those tiny running figures. He cast Toro off. He leaped erect. Stooping, he snatched Toro sideward. Barely in time! It seemed that the handkerchief was almost under Somers' feet.

The double dosage of the drug had confused Somers so that he scarcely thought of combat with his human enemy.

But Toro had lunged to his feet. He stood panting; and then he jumped again upon Somers. They wrestled; fought with wild, scrambling blows. Somers felt the thud of Toro's fist upon his head. Toro's face was close as he panted:

"I can conquer the world with these drugs! I dropped some of it—but I have plenty left—"

"You have to do for me first," Somers retorted.

But his adversary was strong. He was bending Somers backward now, his weight pressing—his dark, saturnine face leering with triumph. Somers felt himself backing against a rocky wall. Incredible, for beyond Toro's shoulder there was another wall advancing.

And Toro saw the danger. He mumbled with startled horror. His grip loosened; he jerked away. Somers, momentarily free, recovered his balance, God! These closing walls! This was no valley in which they were fighting! No more than a narrow rocky trench, a few feet wide and shoulder-high.

Horried realization swept Somers. In another moment his gigantic bulk would be mangled here between these rocky sides. He saw Toro make a leap and scramble upward. The ditch-walls were pressing; but the upper surface had come down to Somers' waist. He jumped; drew himself up and rolled out. It seemed that the slit of rock was closing like a reptile's mouth, trying to seize his emerging legs.

The upper surface—familiar, undulating dirt and rocky terrain lay spread in the distance. As Somers staggered erect,

dizzy with the dwindling scene, again the murderous Toro came at him...

Down under the giant folds of the handkerchief, Anne and her brother saw the enlarging form of Toro rush away; and the gigantic Somers after him. Alden was aware of the danger. He lifted Anne.

"Can you walk?"

"I—I guess so. I'm—better now."

"Got to get outside—get away. They'll be too large—might trample us."

An amazing scene encountered them as they ran outside. A combat of giants! They saw the fallen Toro; Somers astride his chest, choking him. Men twenty feet tall. Now thirty feet!

In another moment, Alden realized, these giants would trample the handkerchief. The sweep of one of their legs would presently encompass a hundred feet of this rocky ground.

Anne was limping with a twisted ankle. Alden picked her up, carried her, running to escape.

"I can take the drug now," Anne murmured. "Foolish of me to be afraid of it. Put me down. We'd better take it, George."

He thought so, too. The gigantic trouser legs of Somers and Toro—great swaying pillars rising into the air, lunged back and forth. Dizzying, mammoth blurs in the gloom. The enormous bodies were blotting out the sky.

Suddenly the Titan shapes lifted upward and were gone. Alden and Anne each took a pellet of the drug. The valley closed in on them. They scrambled out to the surface.

The giants were still fighting. There was more light out here, and they were plainly visible. It seemed that now they were fully a mile away. They swayed, locked together. Five hundred feet tall? It seemed so. Then they went down, rolling, lunging. Then up again, staggering with mammoth strides.

And then Anne cried, "Oh, look! Dear God—look at Roy!"

Somers had been beaten to his knees. Toro's fists were raining blows upon him. Then, suddenly, as though with supreme effort, Somers was erect. One of his arms dangled behind him. The watchers saw that the dangling hand held a boulder. And Somers heaved it aloft and crashed it down full on Toro's head.

There was a breathless moment while Toro stood wavering. The boulder dropped with a great roar to the ground; and Somers staggered back, panting.

A breathless instant. Then the body of Toro fell forward—came toppling, crashing down. For a moment its thousand-foot length writhed and twisted. Then it lay still, with the mammoth figure of Somers bending over it.

CHAPTER V

Tiny Arena

Somers bent down, panting, over the fallen body of his antagonist. Toro was dead. No doubt of that; the smashed, weltering head was mute, gruesome evidence. And there was other evidence: in that moment Somers was aware that the motionless dead thing was dwindling. Death had checked the effect of the drug.

He stood now, swaying over Toro. The body had seemed perhaps seven feet long. He saw it shrinking now. The whole rocky terrain was shrinking. Vague distant blurs of monstrous shapes were dwindling, coming closer, taking familiar form. Why, these tremendous green stalks—they were blades of grass! That giant, yellow-white pole—that was the match-stick! Somers hastily retreated. He must keep away from that match-stick. Alden and Anne might so easily be trampled.

Minutes more of the shrinking landscape. And every moment it was more familiar. That great red blur in the sky—that was the geranium blossom...

Somers turned the other way. The great green stalks were thickening around him. Hardly higher than his head now, and he pushed his way through them. Presently he was wading in them, with their tops lower than his waist.

He came to a knee-high parapet with an abyss beyond it and a great blurred vista of open distance. But the blurs off there were taking form. The monstrous blurred spread of surface, off there so high and far away, came down and shrank and showed itself to be the kitchen table.

Somers stood peering over the brink of the flower box. The vastness of the kitchen floor seemed a hundred feet below him. But soon it was fifty—twenty....

He swung over the edge. For a moment he clung, dangling by his hands. A drop of ten feet. He let go. Landed on his feet. The wall of the flower box dwindled to his shoulders.

The action of the drug was wearing off. Somers sat on the open kitchen floor until the movement of the scene had ceased. The little flower box was here. Two feet long; a foot wide—six inches deep. He bent anxiously over the small spread of dirt, peering, waiting for Anne and her brother.

They came at last. Tiny figures, enlarging. Shoving through the grass—climbing, as he had climbed, over the side and out of the box. Carefully, he lifted the tiny six-inch figure of Anne and set her on the floor; but the dizzying swoop of his carrying hand left her gasping.

At last they were together again, and all things assumed their normal proportions.

Moonlight streamed in through the open window of the darkened kitchen. The placid summer ocean rippled with silver. Somers sat with Anne beside him. Alden was in the adjoining room, at the radio sender.

"I think," Somers said out of a silence, "that the drugs should be destroyed. Too dangerous. And the flower box—the drugs are in it. Destroy this flower box—"

The girl shuddered. "Yes. Poor father—"

A Frankenstein's monster, it had killed its creator.

Again Somers and Anne were silent, awed by their memories. The little flower box stood here before them. The moonlight through the window streamed brilliantly down upon it.

Little arena. Small spread of caked dirt, with a fuzz of tiny grass and a forlorn geranium at its center. What amazing realms of smallness lay hidden here! The match still stood, with a tiny scratch in the dirt beside it. A few inches away, toward the geranium, the dirt was softer. There was a tiny broken mound. Somers' mind swept back. A worm had poked itself up there, and then wriggled away.

He bent closer. Even now he could distinguish the body of Toro. A speck on the dirt near the upright match-stick.

And as he stared, he saw two tiny black ants struggling over the ridges of the dirt. They came upon the tiny speck. They stood for a moment picking it apart. And then they carried it away.

[The end of *Elixir of Doom* by Ray Cummings]