

The
Sky Woman

Charles B. Stilson

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The Sky Woman

A Complete Novelet

By CHARLES B. STILSON

**Out of space she plummeted,
to change three lives
in one breathtaking instant**

Contents

1. [Fire](#)
2. [The Mystery-Stone](#)
3. [What the Stone Contained](#)
4. [The Crystal Casket](#)
5. [The Visitor from the Sky](#)

CHAPTER I

FIRE

I am twenty-four years old, and—I may as well say it at the start—quite good to look at; that is, I have black hair, brown eyes, even white teeth, and a clear complexion, and they match up passably well. Also I am sure that I know how to wear my clothes to the best advantage, and am neither overgrown nor too tiny. I don't know why I mention these things, for they haven't much to do with what is to follow, though they are quite important to me.

It isn't necessary to tell that I know little about writing. Old Miss Dyver at Wellesley, it is true, used to compliment me upon my descriptive ability when I had her in English. But in the same breath she would waggle her flopsy pomp and deplore my lack of imagination. I believe that it was her opinion that it was a sin to possess so much and not the little more requisite to make a gifted writer—I mean imagination.

Miss Dyver was right. I can tell only what I have seen and felt. Nor am I the least bit scientific. I've had a course in domestic science—you needn't sniff at that—but of the things which terminate in "ology" I know next to nothing, and thank Heaven for it!

Yet here am I, Ruth Chasper, as I have introduced myself in three paragraphs, plunging recklessly to tell of what, viewed

merely from its scientific side, is without doubt the most wonderful thing which has happened to the world since thinking, sometimes reasoning, women and men were set upon it to wonder why.

"Yee-mah! Yee-mah! Alla ferma na somma!"

The words will ring in my ears forever until I die! What do they mean? Who uttered them? What was she, and whence, and why? Will science in five thousand years more of groping and striving be able to answer? What cosmic secret might the interpretation of that wild, sweet cry lay bare? Or was it but a dying woman's wail of despair?

"Yee-mah! Yee-mah! Alla ferma na somma!"

No it could not have been despair. The creature was too utterly splendid and daring to have given way to it. She would not have yielded to despair, even when she realized that she had failed, and death was before her. It was not despair. It was an undelivered message—a broken link between two worlds.

So much I allow to my lame imagination. Now I will describe what has happened, though I cannot explain it.

Rickey Moyer is my distant cousin, fourth or fifth. Rickey's father, D. B. Moyer, as a coal baron, turned a fearful lot of carbon into currency in the Pennsylvania Alleghanies, and then died and left Rickey alone to spend it.

Coal-grubbing never appealed to Rickey. He finished a course at Amherst, sold out the mines, and traveled. He seemed to have a consuming desire to know the world he was

living in, and I guess that he has a speaking acquaintance with most of it. He should have; for he started out when he was twenty-one years old; and spent ten years globe-galloping.

Quite suddenly he came home again, two years ago, built him a bungalow in the forest on Black Bear Mountain above the old Moyer homestead in Center County, and settled down.

With him—and this is where I come in—he brought Count Giuseppe Natali, of Florence. They had met somewhere in Borneo. Both were cosmopolites, both fearless. They had been through dangers together in the Dyak country, and had formed a friendship which stuck.

I met the count for the first time last summer at Palm Beach. Not to go into tiresome details, we soon became engaged. Count Natali is a thoroughly delightful fellow, a gentleman to his slender fingertips, and no fortune-hunter. Else he would not have picked me; for I've none to mention, unless Aunt Caroline—but that has nothing to do with it.

In January of this year Count Natali sailed to Italy to look after business connected with his ancestral estate. I understand that it is immense, and boasts, among other attractions, an ancient feudal castle which makes one think of that creepy old romance, "The Mysteries of Udolpho." On his return in early April, Rickey kidnaped him away from me in New York and took him off to the Pennsylvania wilds.

Soon afterward came an invitation to me to come out for a fortnight, bringing my chum, Carrie Andrews, with Aunt Caroline for chaperon. Carrie was of my class at college. We

were both staying with Aunt Caroline at Bayonne.

All three of us thought that it would be a fine little outing—a sort of rest before the strenuositities of the summer season; so I at once wired Rickey that he was on. Naturally I wasn't sorrowful at the prospect of seeing Count Natali again so soon. I had felt that I had rather a bone to pick with Rickey for sequestrating my intended as he had.

Rickey's haunt on Black Bear is no end of a quiet roost; and yet there are plenty of possibilities to while away a couple of weeks, if one cares for them. There is excellent trout-fishing in Forge Run, if one doesn't mind wading in hip-boots and meeting an occasional rattlesnake. And there are a number of pleasant motor trips one can take, if one doesn't mind the rough roads and the hills.

I don't mind these things. I was born in Pennsylvania. So was Aunt Caroline, who isn't a bit fussy about such matters. As for Carrie: she is one of those big, slow-moving, non-excitable blond creatures, whom nothing ever seems to disturb. She who would encounter an earthquake or a boa-constrictor with the same casual interest she would bestow upon a new dance. Very like Rickey himself, Carrie is.

Late in the afternoon of April 17 we were deposited from the up-train at Viaduct, and saw the wooded spine of old Black Bear looming above us across the valley to the left of the tracks.

Viaduct is little more than a signal-tower, a tank, a row of laborers' shanty-shacks, and ten houses—personally I don't believe there are ten; but I am a Pennsylvanian, and I give Viaduct the benefit of a doubt.

Count Natali met us with Rickey's roadster; but Rickey was not with him. Aunt Caroline and Carrie were comfortably discreet while the count greeted me—much more so than a thin-faced woman telegraph-operator, whom I saw watching us with avid interest from the height of her tower. Poor thing! How her eyes would have popped had she known that it was an honest-to-goodness Italian count who was kissing me, or perhaps she did know. Anyhow, she watched, and the proceeding seemed to have her approval.

My first reflection was that Count Natali both looked and felt much better without his mustache. The coating of tan which the spring sun was overlaying on his olive cheeks gave to his thin features the aspect of an Indian chieftain or a Bedouin sheik.

"A-hem!" said Aunt Caroline, after she and Carrie had swept the skyline of Black Bear for what she deemed a proper interval. "A-hem! And where is Richard?"

"Your nephew asked me to make his amends, Mme. Allison," replied Count Natali. "He was unavoidably denied the pleasure of meeting you this evening. We have had a trifle of excitement."

"Fire!" remarked Aunt Caroline, wrinkling her nose and sniffing. "I hope it destroyed nothing valuable."

"Not the bungalow!" I cried dismayedly. I, too, had noticed an acrid, wood-smoky odor about the count's clothes.

"No," he answered our two queries; "only a few trees. I believe that it is now entirely under control. The railroad authorities sent a force of workmen up the mountain to help us. I believe that is their custom—to protect their property."

"*Umph!* I suppose a spark from one of their engines started it, as usual," commented Aunt Caroline.

"Not so; nothing so prosaic." Count Natali shook his handsome head. "It was a very unusual fire; in fact, quite an extraordinary occurrence."

He turned to lead the way to the car.

This began to smack of a mystery. I could see that the count was covertly excited, and I began to feel the thrill of an adventure.

A second later we were in the car, and discussion of the fire for the time was ended. The count manages a car prettily. He whirled us up the zigzag road to the summit of Black Bear.

Rickey and the count had been roughing it; but in deference to our coming Rickey had imported servants up from the big house below, including Mrs. Sanders, a cook whom Aunt Caroline had tried vainly to bribe from his service; so we found everything that three famished and train-weary wights could desire.

CHAPTER II

THE MYSTERY-STONE

No Rickey was waiting for us at the bungalow. He did not come in until we were taking our places at table. When he did put in an appearance he was in such a scandalous condition that I positively was ashamed of him. His tawny hair was all topsyturvy and dark with dust, and his khakis and puttees were smeared with soot and mud, not to mention a black streak across the bridge of his short nose; and numerous holes which flying embers had scorched through his shirt and trousers.

He did not contrast at all favorably with Count Natali, who is always perfection in his get-up. Though, in spite of the dirt and disarray, Rickey still contrived to look cool and efficient.

"Hello, Aunt Caroline and folkses all," was his welcome. He slipped into a chair, and as soon as decency would permit began to eat like a hungry and hurried man.

Have I said that Rickey is a big fellow? No? He is—big and blond and ruddy, with small blue eyes above high cheek-bones—not piggish eyes, but friendly and twinkly, and not a little shrewd, seeing that he inherited them from the coal baron.

"Glad you came, Ruth," he said to me presently. "Joe"—so he always referred to Count Giuseppe—"has been pining. I had to send for you or the blue devils would have got him sure.

He's been as disconsolate as a bushman who's lost his fetish."

Naturally I had nothing to say to this. Aunt Caroline charged to the rescue. She had been studying Rickey sharply.

"Please don't talk nonsense, Richard," she cut in. "Tell us about the fire. You look as though you had been rolled in it."

"Oh, yes, the fire," responded Rickey, who had been talking off the top of his mind and thinking hard about something else deeper down.

He glanced at Count Natali, and I think that the count shook his head.

"Well?" from Aunt Caroline.

"Well," echoed Rickey, "we had one, aunty. It was some fire, too, I'll inform the universe, while it lasted, and now it's out."

A prodigious' bite of Mrs. Sanders' home-made biscuit interrupted communication. I could hear Aunt Caroline's toe tapping.

Count Natali bridged the gap with questions about our trip. But Aunt Caroline, like an elephant, refused to take the bridge.

"What started it?" she pursued, wading in.

"That's what twoscore men have been laboring all day to discover, aunty," said Rickey tantalizingly. Just then I think that he became aware of Aunt Caroline's foot; for he muttered

a hasty word to his biscuit; and at the same time hitched in his chair.

"We thought it was a falling star," he went on, freeing his utterance. "We've been grubbing an amateur coal-mine in the mountain on the strength of finding it and seeing what it's made of."

"I'm *sure* that is nothing to be so secretive about," declared Aunt Caroline.

"And did you find the star at the bottom of your mine?" asked Carrie.

"Yes," Rickey answered; "only it isn't a star." He turned his voice on Count Natali. "That section boss is interested, Joe," he said. "He has sent for an armful of dynamite. He wants to blast it."

"You surely will not allow that?" Anxiety, if not consternation, was in the count's tones.

"Not all in a chunk, anyway."

Aunt Caroline set down her teacup with firmness.

"Richard, will you have the goodness to inform us just what it is that you have found in the hole, which you will or will not blast, and why?" she demanded.

"A meteorite, aunty," replied Rickey, reduced to terms. "At least, by all the rules of the game, it should be a meteorite. It's a large one. The heat engendered by the friction of its hurried

transit through our mundane atmosphere was what started the fire and led to its discovery."

"But why not blast it?" I asked, coming to Aunt Caroline's aid, as she had to mine. "Is it dangerous? Is it still too hot?"

"Why blast it at all?" queried Carrie.

Rickey appeared somewhat embarrassed, which in itself was unnatural.

"Joe and I may be a pair of blithering idiots," he returned; "but we are agreed that this star or meteorite or mystery—mystery, whether star or meteorite—is a very extraordinary proposition. It has—well, it has an uncanny sort of a hand-made appearance."

Aunt Caroline drained her third cup of tea and set it down with a decision that threatened the china.

"Richard," she said, "your explanations are as clear as a Moshannon fog. The only portion of them which is understandable is your hint at your mental condition. How far from here is this phenomenon? I propose to see it before I close my eyes."

It was evident that this declaration relieved Rickey. He brightened up.

"Not more than a mile, aunty," he answered. "We can go the best part of the way in the car, and there will be a fine moon to see by. After you folks have looked the thing over will be time enough to diagnose my mental symptoms. It's either what it

ought to be, and Joe and I are jack-donkeyed, or else it's one of the marvels of the ages."

"How intensely interesting you make it sound, Mr. Moyer," volunteered Carrie; and that ended the table conversation so far as concerned the meteorite.

I couldn't help being impressed by Rickey's manner. The mere fact that he was excited—and excitement fairly oozed from his pores—was impressive to one who knew him. But what was he driving at? How on earth could a meteorite be hand-made? What were we about to see up yonder on Black Bear by the light of the moon? If I had possessed a little more imagination, I am sure that I should have shivered.

Soon after our meal Rickey led the way to his touring-car, and the five of us piled in. We three women sat in the tonneau, which was already occupied by Frisky, Rickey's Skye terrier. Frisk, too, had been digging in the burned ground, to judge by appearances, and in his exuberance at seeing so many old acquaintances he insisted upon making a mess of our skirts.

Before we started Rickey fetched out from the bungalow an armful of blankets, which he hung over the robe-rail. As the night was quite warm, I wondered what he wanted of them.

We rolled off northwestward along the crest of Black Bear ridge behind the bungalow clearing, following a narrow, ruddy old lumber trail which I remembered from having explored it as a child in search of arbutus, honeysuckle, and tea-berries.

After twenty minutes' driving, which the difficulties of the road made very slow, we reached the edge of the burned area. A grand moon had risen, and cast a peculiar light on the carpet of ashes which the fire had left, and against which the jagged stumps of broken trees and the scorched, distorted bodies of those still standing were limned in sharply defined silhouettes.

At intervals a light breeze set this arboreal cemetery to creaking and groaning lugubriously, and fanned our faces with an acrid warmth that was not of the night. Somewhere in the dusky distance a bird was clamoring for the immediate castigation of poor Will. Nearer at hand an owl hooted dolefully—doubtless mourning over having been burned out of her house and home in a hollow log.

"Isn't this delightfully spooky?" whispered Carrie, who would hobnob with a ghost with animation were the opportunity offered, and consider herself in luck. Aunt Caroline sniffed. Frisky yapped at the owl. I kept still and stared. I may be deficient in imagination, but I really did shiver a little. The picture was compelling.

Rickey halted the car.

He jumped out and shouldered his blankets.

We followed him across the soft, crisp flooring of ashes.

Occasionally we passed smoking heaps where the breeze would stir the embers so that little spurts of flame leaped up and danced like elves of mischief over the destruction they had done. These were too far isolated from the main forest, Rickey said, to be accounted dangerous. Besides, watch was being

kept.

In the center of this desolation we found the cause of it, Rickey's mystery-stone.

Where it had fallen, in the slope of a little dip, or valley, was an ash-strewn pit, some twelve feet across, resembling those shell-craters which one sees in the war movies. Through the lower rim of it workmen with picks and spades had dug a deep trenchlike passage to the stone itself and then had undermined it so that it had toppled from its first position and lay along the trench.

At the bottom of the dip the ashes had been cleared away, and a brisk wood fire was burning, around which a number of men sat upon logs. These were part of the section gang which the railroad had sent up to help Rickey fight the fire. A strong aroma of coffee was grateful to our noses after their long struggle with smoke and soot.

A stockily built man of middle age detached himself from the group at the fire as we came over the edge of the dip. He approached Rickey, an Irish brogue issuing from his broad and exceedingly grimy countenance.

"The dinnymite will be here directly, Mither Moyer," he said, removing his hat. "Shall we be afther crackin' her tonight, sor?"

His voice was eager. His men around the fire strained forward to catch the reply.

"Not tonight, Conoway; we'll do the job by daylight,"

responded Rickey. "The old railroad can spare a few of you for another day, can't it?"

"Yis—I suppose," assented Mr. Conoway, evidently disappointed.

"You told your man to fetch drills?" pursued Rickey.

"Oh, yis, sor. Ye're sthille daycided to bust her open wid pops, sor?"

"Yes. If there should happen to be anything inside worth looking at, we want to injure it as little as possible. Fetch up a torch or two, will you, Conoway? I want to exhibit our find to the ladies."

We stepped around to the mouth of the passage and looked at the mystery. And I am afraid were not, at first sight, particularly impressed. At least, I was not, save by its size.

It was a monster of a stone, all of fifteen feet long, and at its middle, where its girth was greatest, as thick through as the height of a tall man. I didn't wonder at the great hole it had torn in the earth when it struck, or the depth to which it had penetrated. The bottom of the socket from which it had been tipped was nearly on a level with the floor of the dip. The impact, I thought, must have jarred a considerable portion of the mountain.

Against the newly turned earth of the excavation it

contrasted darkly. Its surface must recently have been molten. I touched it with my fingers, and it still was warm. Small stones, gravel, and clods of scorched earth were encrusted in it like gipsy settings. The upper end of it as it lay, which had struck first was splayed out and blunted.

Three of Mr. Conoway's men fetched pine-knot torches and flashed their light into the passage and the pit. I found the glamour of the thing grow upon me. Even a weak imagination was stirred to ponderings.

It lay in the trough of the trench with the wavering torchlight flickering over it, a dull-brown, somber, sullen, inert mass of stone. Yet it was not of our world. It was material evidence of other worlds beyond our ken. To me astronomy and kindred sciences had appealed as largely guess work. Here was evidence that the stars were more than mere watchlights set to brighten our dark ways. Whence had it come, this unearthly visitant? Next to our awe of time is our awe of distance. How many millions of miles had it fallen? The thought dizzied me.

"Isn't it fortunate that it did not strike upon rock instead of earth?" said Carrie, pointing to its jammed and misshapen tip.

"Would have been one grand smash, and nothing left but flinders," remarked Rickey. "I shouldn't have cared to have been riding in it at the time."

"Nonsense!" ejaculated Aunt Caroline, prodding at it with her toes. "What is there about it to give you such ideas? Why do you suppose that something may be inside of it?"

Count Natali took a torch from a laborer's hand.

"But see, *madame*," he urged, stepping into the trench to the head of the stone. "And do you come hither, too, *carissima*"—this to me—"and Mlle. Andrews, and see."

I followed until I could peer over his stooping shoulder. Aunt Caroline and Carrie squeezed in on the other side. We stared where he pointed.

"I see nothing, except that it has been broken," said Aunt Caroline, readjusting her slipping spectacles.

"Yes, *madame*; a fragment has been chipped away by a hammer-blow. Now watch closely."

He moved one of his slender fingers along the fresh scar, tracing a zigzag pattern. Looking closely, we could then see a darker line in the substance of the rock.

"It looks like an irregular seam—a suture," remarked Carrie, who won honors in physiology.

"It may be only a vein in the rock," suggested Aunt Caroline; but her skepticism was shaky.

"Too regular, aunty," countered Rickey. "It's a joint, and a devilish clever one, and it's closed with some kind of cement that is harder than adamant. What do you say, Conoway?"

"The same as I did at first, sor," the Irishman answered. "There's something inside of that there that somewan put there for to stay, sor. Unless the bodies up yon are gunnin' for us down here, an' their projacktul didn't go off." Conoway pointed toward the stars.

"No, I don't think it's a heavenly 'dud,'" laughed Rickey, and added soberly, "but just the same someone up there may have fired it."

"I am going home and going to bed," announced Aunt Caroline, backing out of the trench.

"Joe will drive you girls back," said Rickey.

"What are you going to do?" asked aunt.

"Sleep by it." Rickey tumbled his blankets into the trench. "Some of these chaps here have it in their heads that this stone is a kind of wandering treasure chest full of diamonds and gold, and that they've only to crack it to see 'em come pouring out. I'm going to guard against anything premature."

"All right," Aunt Caroline assented. "Don't you dare to open that thing, Richard, until I am here in the morning. I shall get up at half-past eight."

"Right-o, aunty. If anyone tries to dynamite it before you get on the job he'll have to blow me to glory along with it."

"In which case you might find out where it came from and why," said Carrie. On the way back to the bungalow she asked, "What did Mr. Conoway mean by 'pops,' I wonder?"

"It is that they will drill the stone full of small holes, *mademoiselle*," explained Count Natali, "and explode the dynamite in light charges, chipping away the stone a fraction at a time."

CHAPTER III

WHAT THE STONE CONTAINED

Less prepossessing, but more mystery-laden, was the big stone by the light of next morning's sun. We arrived at the scene of operations shortly after nine o'clock, Aunt Caroline having made the concession of rising earlier than she had promised. The preparations for blasting were in full swing.

Three power-drills had been lugged up the mountainside in the night, and six swarthy workmen were busy along the trench, attacking the surface of the stone with an uproar which must have resembled a continuous volley of machine guns. A dozen others were waiting to spell them. The balance of the fire-fighting force, much against their inclinations, had been herded down the mountain by Mr. Conoway to less interesting employment.

I noticed that all of the laborers, with the exception of the Irishman, treated Count Natali with an obsequious deference, rather strange to an American, until one reflected that most of them probably were Italians, and the others from lands where counts count for more than they do here.

Viewed by daylight, the irregular line in the substance of the stone which had been disclosed by the hammer-blow, and which Carrie had dubbed a suture, was even more noticeable

than it had been under the torches.

Count Natali found us a position near the rim of the little amphitheater, from where we could watch the proceedings safely, and where we could talk undisturbed by the clattering, popping drills, which made conversation in their immediate vicinity an impossibility.

Presently came Rickey, dirtier and more elated than ever, to announce:

"We'll be blasting in another half hour. We've been at her since sun-up."

Aunt Caroline, who had once more inspected the odd, jointlike appearance of the stone, was disposed to argue.

"Isn't it quite possible, Richard, that it is something let fall from an airplane?" she asked. "These aviators are becoming as careless as motorists."

From the corners of her eyes she glanced in the direction of Count Natali.

"Considering that it must weigh all of twenty tons, I'm afraid that your suggestion is hardly tenable, aunty," replied Rickey, his eyes twinkling. "Aviators don't carry such pebbles around for ballast."

"Some time ago I read in the newspapers that attempts were to be made to signal to Mars at about this time. Mightn't it be that this is some sort of a Jules Verne projectile, which has been fired from earth, and fallen back?"

This was from Carrie. Aunt Caroline gave her an approving look.

Rickey smiled and went down among the workmen. What a big, capable fellow he was! Mr. Conoway, who cared nothing for counts, was, in his Irish way, as deferential to Rickey as were the others to the nobleman.

Soon after the expiration of the half hour the clamor of the drills ceased. They had pecked a neat double row of holes along the upper side of the stone. One by one the holes were charged with dynamite, and the explosive set off from a hand battery. They cracked like big firecrackers. At each explosion a shower of fragments flew up from the surface of the stone and fell around the lower part of the dip.

When the first row of holes had been blown out, Count Natali went down to inspect the work. From where we sat we could see that the stone was beginning to present a gnawed and ill-used appearance.

"Nothing at all," was the count's report as he came back.

An explosion of greater violence than any of the others followed.

After the crash there sounded a hissing like that of escaping steam. The laborers below ran toward the trench shouting.

Rickey thrust his arm recklessly into the opening. Then he

called for a drill-rod, which Mr. Conoway handed to him, and I saw its slender length disappear in the stone, and heard the clink of it as he groped around in the inside.

"Does he expect to find a rabbit?" Aunt Caroline murmured.

"It is that there is a cavity, and another stone is within," reported Count Natali. "It is very strange. It has the appearance of a sarcophagus." His fingers trembled as he stroked the place where his mustache had been. "I believe that it is a find."

"A mummy! That's not so bad!" exclaimed Aunt Caroline triumphantly. She had caught at the word sarcophagus. "I knew someone must have dropped the thing. They must have been hurrying it to some museum. Probably it will be advertised."

"How interesting if it is the mummy of a Martian," put in Carrie, not without malice, and drew a quick "Nonsense!" from aunt.

A number of blasts followed in rapid succession. The great stone seemed to leap and crumble in its bed. I shrieked; for several objects like coiled serpents flew into the air whirling, and one of them nearly fell on my foot.

Count Natali stooped down and picked it up.

It was a powerful metal spring!

Only a glance we bestowed upon it, and then stared down the hillside.

Where had been the long brown mass of stone was a heap of

debris and earth fallen from the trench. Partly buried in the pile was a cylinder, more slender and shapely than its husk had been. Its surface was polished, and it reflected the light of the sun in a greenish sheen.

We arose and went down to it.

It was like a great coffin hewn for a giant. Whether it was of stone or metal we could not tell. In one spot a fragment had been chipped away by the blasts, and the fracture was scintillant with tiny particles which refracted the light vividly. At intervals the entire surface was pitted with sockets, for the springs which had maintained it centered in the interior vacuum of its shell. There had been many springs, nearly two hundred.

Mr. Conoway's workmen gathered about the trench, shouting, chattering and gesticulating. They were inclined to crowd us, until at a stern word from Count Natali they drew to one side.

I laid a hand upon the cylinder and shivered. It was chill as ice with an unearthly cold.

Aunt Caroline stared down at it and shuddered from other motives.

"What a godlike way to be buried," soliloquized Carrie. "To be hurled out through uncounted millions of miles of space and rest at last upon an unknown world!"

Aunt Caroline's "Nonsense!" was notably weak.

"Why do you folkses all take it so for granted that there's a dead one in here?" asked Rickey, clapping a hand on the cylinder and drawing it hastily away.

"Rickey!" I cried. "You don't mean to suggest that there may be something *alive* in there!"

"Well, and why not? Those chaps who were clever enough to shoot it across should know some way to preserve life for the few months necessary for the transit. I shall not be surprised to find the traveler in good condition and famously ready for his breakfast."

Months! Yes, Rickey was right about that. I hadn't reflected that it might take nearly a year for an object to fall from Mars to the earth, if this thing was from Mars.

"When is the opening scheduled to be?" Carrie inquired. "I am anxious to meet the gentleman; and he can't be very comfortable in that box."

"I should think that he, or it—if anything living was sealed in there—would be frozen," I said, thinking of the intense cold I had felt.

Count Natali in turn stooped and laid a hand on the sarcophagus.

"But that was the purpose of the vacuum space, *carissima mia*," he explained, oblivious of the stares which this endearment drew from his countrymen; "to provide an intervening coldness, so that what was within might not be destroyed by the heat which fused the surface of the stone. It is

like a monster thermos bottle."

Aunt Caroline glanced from one to another of us in bewilderment.

CHAPTER IV

THE CRYSTAL CASKET

Our dark-skinned laborers were waiting with unconcealed impatience to attack the job. Not for them were fanciful speculations as to where the strange object might have come from. To them it was a treasure trove, in which they possibly might share. At an order from Mr. Conoway they swarmed into the trench, and loose earth and stones began to fly. Rickey seized an extra spade, and his two great bronzed arms did double the work of the best of them.

Count Natali fetched the blankets down the slope and fixed another seat for us.

Before the trench was more than partially cleared we could see that a clearly marked line of junction extended length-wise around the sarcophagus. Cover had been joined to body with great exactness, and only the thinnest of red lines indicated the presence of a cement. At intervals along the sides of the sarcophagus some manner of sockets, larger than those in which the spring had been fitted, had been sunk on the juncture

line, and these too were filled with the reddish substance.

Rickey dug at one of them with the nail-file in his penknife.

"Hello; this stuff isn't so hard," he said. "Fetch some chisels, somebody, and we'll clear these places out."

Buried in the cement of each socket was a bent metal bar, or L-shaped handle, similar to those upon kitchen water-taps. Some of them were turned upwards and others down, but all were at right angles to the cement-filled line.

As the sarcophagus lay somewhat askew in the trench, crowbars were applied until it rested squarely upon its bottom. Then Rickey tightened a wrench upon one of the sunken handles and held it while Mr. Conoway struck it a smart tap with a hammer. It turned, slowly at first, and then more easily, until it stopped on a line with the cemented joint of the sarcophagus.

One after another all the handles were turned. Still the joint was firm. Under Rickey's direction an octette of workers set the blades of chisels and the points of their crowbars at intervals, along the line, and as many more men with hammers or pieces of stone struck upon them simultaneously.

A shout went up as the stubborn lid was seen to be yielding and rising. At just the right instant Rickey thrust a crowbar into the widening interstice, and pried with all his broad-shouldered might.

Lubricated by the soft cement, the huge lid moved almost without noise, balanced, swayed, toppled, and subsided with a

think on the earth of the trench.

We three sprang up and rubbed elbows with the crowding men. But this, as was remarked by Mr. Conoway, was a particularly well-packed parcel. Nothing of its contents was to be seen save a mass of grayish, woolly-appearing stuff, so tightly wadded and compressed that it retained the imprint of the inside of the lid as though it had been modeling clay.

Only Mr. Conoway's bellows of restraint prevented the laborers from stampeding and making short work of this, to such pitch had risen their eagerness to lay bare the treasure.

"This is your package, boss," he said to Rickey.

Rickey nodded, stuck his hands into the stuff and pulled out no great amount.

"Gee, it's rammed in tight enough!" he grunted, and attacked it again.

Curiosity moved Count Natali to take a wisp of the wadding, step back a few paces, and touch a lighted match to it. It refused to burn, or so much as scorch.

"*Huh!* The beggars know asbestos," commented Rickey, who had watched the operation. "Let your gang tackle this stuff, Conoway, if they're so blamed anxious."

"Aye, sor."

But they had understood, and did not wait for the Irishman's order. A score of muscular brown hands, reaching from both

sides of the sarcophagus, seized the asbestos packing and tore it out. Among them was one pair of slender woman's hands, wrinkled and tremulous. Aunt Caroline, her habitual dignity for the moment in abeyance, was laboring to vindicate her theory, and took her pound of asbestos with the rest of them. The stuff came out in wads and layers. There seemed to be no end of it. Dust flew from, it and choked us.

Count Natali pressed my arm.

"How excited we all are; is it not so, *carissima*?" he said.

His soft clasp hardened to a grip of iron, and I gasped with the pain of it.

"*Por Dio!*" he whispered, and again, "*Por Dio!*"

Then for many seconds all our group was silent, and a quarter of a mile down the slope of Black Bear I heard plainly the splash and tinkle of Forge Run flinging itself endlessly over a ten-foot fall.

For a great layer of the asbestos had come away in the workers' hands, and disclosed the contents of the sarcophagus.

As a newly-fallen icicle might lie embedded in a bank of rain-soiled snow, a crystal casket lay glittering against the bed of dull-gray asbestos which surrounded it, and within the casket's gleaming panels lay neither mummy nor man, but a woman with sun-gold hair.

Many authors have written that we of womankind are prone to see our sisters through cats' eyes and to judge them with

prejudice and jealousy. That may be true; I won't argue it. But I, another woman, shall think always of the being who lay in that scintillant crystal casket as the most beautiful thing that ever came to earth. So poignant was the beauty of her that mere memory of it hurts.

No language which has yet been written can make one see the perfections of her—perfections of every line and contour of face and figure—and I am not going to make myself ridiculous by attempting to put the burden upon my English.

But she was a blonde of a blondness which made poor Carrie's type look dingy and scrubby by contrast. She lay easily upon a long cushion affair of soft, white material, which had been crinkled and padded around her until it fitted her as the satin of a jewel-case fits the brooch of pearls for which it was made.

It was difficult to believe that such a radiant thing could die; though I suppose that all of us who were staring into that crystal casket had no other thought than that she must be dead. The casket itself and all its trappings suggested death. But its inmate, by her easy posture, the bloom of her cheeks and the carmine of her lips, suggested slumber only.

Her costume is hardly worth mentioning. It was—well, what a fastidious woman might have chosen for a nap, and scant. Her hair flowed loose. She wore no jewels of any kind, not so much as a single finger-ring. But had she come to us bedizened with gems and arrayed like Balkis, she could never have impressed us as she did lying there in simple white in the white purity of her glittering crystal casket.

We stared, and were as still as she.

Oddly enough, it was Mr. Conoway who first broke our startled silence.

"Raymarkably well prayserved, isn't she, sor?" he said to Rickey, and removed his hat.

Count Natali's grip of my arm—the flesh bore blue fingermarks for days—relaxed, and with something very like an oath he caught up one of the blankets and threw it across the sarcophagus, hiding the casket from profaning eyes.

"Thank you, Joe," acknowledged Rickey, shaking himself as though coming out of a dream. He had not heard Mr. Conoway's first banality. The Irishman committed a second.

"Beloike wan of us had betther be afther notifyin' the coroner, sor," he remarked solemnly, and put on his hat again.

"I will attend to it, Conoway," answered Rickey, "depend upon it. Now, if I may impose upon you a bit more, I'll have your gang here give us a lift with that casket, and we'll take it over to the bungalow. We can sling it in the blankets over a couple of poles."

All this while not a word from Aunt Caroline of Carrie. I stole a peep at them. Aunt was weeping softly into her handkerchief. Carrie was lost in thought.

Mr. Conoway's laborers made a difficulty about complying with Rickey's request. When it turned out that there was no treasure in the sarcophagus, they, after their first surprise, experienced a rapid loss of interest, replaced by a superstitious fear of its contents. They refused to touch the crystal case, until Count Natali, exerting an influence superior to Mr. Conoway's threats, virtually compelled them to do it.

The count drove us slowly back to the bungalow. Behind us, Rickey followed, directing ten of the laborers, who, walking two and two, carried the casket in a blanket sling.

"Poor thing! Poor thing!" said Aunt Caroline, recovering speech. "I shall see her face to the day of my death. Don't talk to me about her, please. I'm very much upset, really."

We ate a subdued dinner, while the casket, swathed in blankets, lay upon the floor in Rickey's hunting-room, which looks north. Out of deference to Aunt Caroline's state of mind, we forbore reference to it during the meal.

Various as I suppose our views concerning it were, it exercised a fascination upon us all, and we were soon gathered around it again.

"I hope you will have her decently buried as soon as possible, Richard," said aunt, as, after another long look at the unworldly beauty of the occupant of the crystal case, she turned away, shaking her head sadly.

"Buried!" he echoed. "Not until I am sure that she is really dead."

Aunt's jaw fell.

"Richard!" she ejaculated, "you're not—you're not going to —"

"I'm going to take the means necessary to be certain," he replied firmly. He knelt down and began to inspect the casket.

Count Natali made a pretense of assisting him—a pretense, I say; for it was patent that he could not keep his eyes from the woman.

Aunt Caroline seated herself on a divan and gazed fixedly out the window, her toes keeping up a ceaseless tattoo on the floor.

Moved by I do not know what impulse, Carrie went to Rickey's baby-grand in the corner, and began to strum mournfully in a slow minor key. I continued to stand by the head of the casket.

"Air tight, and perhaps soundproof," said Rickey at the end of ten minutes. "Here's some kind of a lever, which seems to connect through to a sort of tank arrangement inside, and there's apparently another lever inside here, near her shoulder. Shall I chance it, Joe?" He laid a hand on the outer lever.

The count nodded abstractedly, though I am sure that he had not sensed the question.

Rickey pressed the lever. His sleeve was turned back, and I saw the cords of his forearm bulge under the skin. The lever yielded noiselessly for an inch or more.

"There," he said, "now let's see what happens."

Nothing apparently, not immediately. We waited for I suppose five minutes, though it seemed fifteen; Rickey squatted on his haunches, Count Natali kneeling, and I standing.

I cried out sharply. I was first to see it—the flutter of a pulse in the neck.

Before I could point out my discovery to the others, the woman's bosom heaved softly, and at once a tide of rich color swept into her cheeks.

She *was* alive!

CHAPTER V

THE VISITOR FROM THE SKY

Carrie and aunt had come at my cry. We stared down at this miracle in silence, and with swirling senses. Then Rickey swore softly to himself, and I think we were all grateful to him, even aunt.

"She is not dead, but sleeping," murmured Aunt Caroline.

"I'm going to waken her," said Rickey.

With the handle of his pocket-knife he struck upon the side of the casket, near the woman's head. The crystal rang like a bell under the blow. Aunt started violently.

"Richard! Stop that instantly!" she commanded. Really it did seem a fearful thing to do, but Rickey struck three times.

Mrs. Sanders, who could not have been far from the door, thrust her gray head through and asked if anything was wanted.

"You may bring tea, Sanders," replied Aunt Caroline weakly. Mrs. Sanders cast a horrified glance at the casket and withdrew.

The crystal had not ceased to vibrate under Rickey's last blow when the woman within stirred; a change of expression passed across her features, and she opened her eyes. They were black as night, when I had thought that they would have been blue.

For only an instant her face retained the bewilderment of the newly awakened; then the brain took command, and she looked up into Count Natali's face and smiled. I heard him catch his breath with a gasp, and he bent nearer the casket. She seemed to see only him of all of us, and as if in response to his involuntary movement, her hands crept up until they came in contact with the crystal lid of her prison.

The feel of it touched the spring of memory. She flashed a glance at the rest of us, and her wonderful eyes widened. Groping at her shoulder with one hand, she pressed the lever which Rickey had discovered there. It released hidden springs, or else there was a pressure of gas within the narrow chamber.

The lid rose swiftly, discovering that it was hinged at one side, and fell over on the heap of blankets.

A puff of cool, choking atmosphere struck me in the face. I inhaled some of it, and it dizzied me. I reeled back and took hold of a chair for support.

The strange woman arose from her cushioned rest, and extending a hand to Count Natali for his aid, stepped out upon the floor.

One glimpse of her face I had before the catastrophe.

Asleep, she had been of supernal beauty; awake, her black eyes flashing, and her cheeks aglow, her face presented such a combination of intellect and passion as I have never seen or expect to see upon any other mortal countenance, fleshly or painted. Queenly is too weak an adjective to describe it, but it is the only one I can think of.

For an instant I saw her so, smiling as Count Natali bowed low before her. Then came a change, a terrible change. She had taken a step forward. Her mouth was open for speech, when I saw her glorious eyes go wide. She swayed, one hand clutching at her bosom, and the ripe color faded in her cheeks.

Whatever weakness had come upon her, I thought at the moment she had overcome. She moved on toward the north door with a regal carriage, still holding Natali's hand, but she did not speak, and her face was like death.

At the doorway she paused and looked down the sunlighted slopes of Black Bear and up at the cloudless sky. A supreme

triumph conquered the shadow of disaster in her face. Half turning, she let fall Count Natali's fingers, raised her white arms above her head, and cried in a voice like a silver bell:

"Yee-mah! Yee-mah! Alla ferma na somma!"

It was her swan song. Before the echoes of the marvelous voice had ceased to thrill us, she had collapsed, choking, into the Italian's arms.

We ran toward them and helped him to carry her to the divan, but all we could do was useless. In three minutes she was dead.

When that fact was sure we stood and stared stupidly. Natali hung over her, his face like that of a carven statue, the statue of a red Indian or a Bedouin sheik. From the instant when she had smiled into his eyes, for him, the rest of us had ceased to exist.

Our spell of sorrow and horror was broken by Mrs. Sanders, who bustled in with an armful of tea-things, sized up the situation, and fainted in a terrific clatter.

I recall hearing Carrie say, "I wish I could do that; I do really," and then my nerves would stand no more. Instead of turning to and helping them resuscitate Mrs. Sanders, I escaped to my room, and for more than an hour did battle with a round of hysterics.

When I was once more presentable, I found that Aunt Caroline had retired with a headache—I suspect that it was another name for what had ailed me—and Carrie had gone out for a walk in the woods.

Rickey and Count Natali were in the hunting room, my cousin sitting dejectedly upon the divan, and the count standing at the north doorway and looking down the mountainside. The crystal casket had again received its burden, and the blankets were over it.

"Well, I suppose there is only one thing to be done, Joe," I heard Rickey say as I came down the stairs, "and that is to do as the Irishman said, and call in the coroner. Then we will bury her."

"No; I beg of you to let me dispose of those arrangements," interposed the count earnestly, without turning from his stand. "I know that you will not gainsay me, my friend. I will go down at once to the station. I have messages to dispatch." He stepped out without seeing me, and a couple of minutes later we heard him leaving in one of Rickey's cars.

Rickey caught sight of me and jumped up. I suppose that I must have looked woebegone, for he shook his head over me, and then managed to grin.

"I say, Ruth, old girl, let's you and I go out and walk it off," he proposed.

At the edge of the clearing we met Carrie coming in. Her eye-lids were swollen.

Rickey explained to me what he thought had happened. It was our air which had killed the strange visitor. The

atmosphere of earth must be of a different quality from that at Mars.

"But I don't see how we could have helped it," he said. "She attempted a splendid thing, and failed. I feel like crying like a baby every time I think of the sheer pluck of her."

I did, too. It was as if a goddess had died, as Carrie said afterward.

I saw the sky woman only once more. It was in the night, that same night. I could sleep only in nervous cat-naps, and when I did I dreamed such fantasies that it was a relief to wake from them. Finally I gave it up, and put on a dressing-gown and sat at the window. There was a white moon and a silence, and I thought and thought.

At first my musings were disjointed and silly, evidenced, by the persistent running through my mind of two lines of a rather vulgar old college ditty:

Sing ho for the great Semiramis!
Her like we shall ne'er see again—

which came to me, as such things sometimes will insist in our human brains upon intruding themselves among the sacrosanct and the sublime.

Truth to tell, contemplation of the events of the day gave me a touch of vertigo. The stupendous hardihood and daring of the sky woman overawed me. She could not have known that she would find human beings to release her, nor had she means to release herself; yet she had taken the thousandth chance, and

had herself flung out through the space toward our world, gambling her life with magnificent recklessness.

Had she missed her mark, she might have fallen through infinity and eternity; perhaps been sucked into the vortex of some blazing sun, to perish like a moth in a candle-flame. All these things she had weighed, and still her splendid spirit had been undaunted.

Surely this was the supreme test of mortal courage, confidence and fortitude; or it was fatalism to its *n*th power. To die is less than she had offered. She had made the cast, and failed; and before the sheer splendor of her failure the most glorious human achievements that I could think of were dimmed. Columbus launching himself westward across unknown waters in his leaky caravels, was a puny comparison.

And no glory had offered, not as we rate glory; she could not have returned to tell her people that she had succeeded.

An impulse grew strong upon me to go down to the hunting-room. I fought it, for I was afraid; but it conquered, and I stole down the stairs to take another look at the wondrous stranger. How glad I have always been that I did so!

The blankets had been thrown back from the crystal case, and the moonlight shone in through a window and gleamed and glittered frostily upon its translucent fabric and upon the beauty, now pallid and awful, of its occupant.

I paused upon the rug without the doorway; for the sky woman was not alone.

At the head of the casket sat, or rather crouched, Count Natali. His face was toward me, but he did not see me; his eyes were upon the dead. One by one, great, slow tears were trickling down his cheeks.

As I stood there, almost afraid to breathe, Rickey stepped in through the outer door. He too had been moved to night-wandering from his bed it seemed, for he was in his bathrobe. He saw Count Natali, and went to him and laid a hand upon his shoulder.

"Come, Joe, old man, best go to bed," he said.

"I cannot, my friend," Natali answered. "I must watch. Something has come to me that is tearing my heart to shreds. How shall I say it? I—" His voice broke, and he pointed to the casket and covered his face.

"I think that I can understand, Joe," said Rickey very gently. "I am sorry."

I crept back upstairs and to bed. I too understood. I suppose that I ought to have felt jealous and horrid, but I didn't. I just felt very small and insignificant and lost.

Poor sky woman! Living or dead, I would not have fought you. Anyway, I couldn't have competed with a princess of the blood royal of Mars—and she must have been all of that.

In the morning Rickey took me for another walk in the woods.

"Joe has asked me to tell you something, little one," he

began, facing me squarely, but speaking in a I'd-rather-be-hung-than-do-it manner.

"Then you needn't," I interrupted, "for I know what it is. I was at the door of the hunting-room last night, and I couldn't help overhearing part of it. And you needn't be compassionate, Rickey Moyer, for somehow I can't seem to care as perhaps I should—and I'm glad—"

Maybe I leaned just the least bit toward him, he looked so big and strong and leanable. Anyway, his hand crept under my chin. I don't know what he saw in my tilted face; but next instant I was crying against his breast-pocket, and he was holding me comfortingly tight in his great arms and telling me that he had cared for me since we were small, "only somehow Joe seemed to have beat me to it."

So, you see, I have found compensation for what the sky woman cost me. Rickey and I are to be married soon.

And the sky woman? Count Natali had her embalmed in some marvelous Italian fashion and took her back to Italy with him. I often have a vision of him sitting in a moonlighted hall of his old Udolpho castle with his dead but imperishable bride, while the slow tears glisten upon his cheeks and fall upon her crystal casket.

[The end of *The Sky Woman* by Charles B. Stilson]