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SECRET OF THE SUN

By
RAY CUMMINGS

Author of "The Great Adventure," "Around the Universe," etc.

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A Rare Treasure Was Locked in the Solar Spectrum—and Olaf Stevens Wanted to Steal It!

Big Olaf Stevens sat in a corner of the laboratory, his huge powerful hands dangling between his knees, and silently watched Dr. Argon. The little gray-haired scientist was crouched over his work-bench, the electronic sheen of prismatic light upon him.

It was late afternoon. The laboratory, here in Argon's lonely home in the hills of Northern New York, was dark with shrouded windows. The single door which led down into the living room was closed. A huge electro-spectroscope was hissing with the current in its prisms. It was trained on the ceiling where, through an aperture, a pencil-ray of sunlight came down—sunlight that was spread upon the spectroscope's big image-screen with a great band of lines that showed the burning elements in the gases of the sun.

The stolid, slow-witted Olaf Stevens only vaguely understood the purpose of the spectroscope. For a year he had been working with Dr. Argon—just the two of them alone here in the metal-concrete house on the hilltop by the edge of the woods. Master and servant. Stevens' thick, gnarled hands were twitching now as they dangled between his knees. This thing that Argon claimed to have discovered—this mysterious secret of the sun—would bring fame and riches. A secret that could be sold for a great fortune. Argon had told him so. Whatever it was the scientist had manufactured it was worth thousands of times more than its weight in gold. Of that, Stevens was certain.

A shadow from the chassis of the spectroscope illuminated by the fluorescent tubes behind it, fell upon Olaf's heavy, thick-featured face. He was glad of that. Old Argon would not see that he was waiting—as he had waited impatiently for so many days—for the experiment to be finished. It would be so easy to seize the little scientist by the throat, to spill that retort of molten metal upon him and tell the people over in town that Argon had killed himself in an accident resulting from some experiment.

"I've almost got it, Olaf." Argon's voice, quivering with eager excitement and triumph, mingled with the hiss of the small hydrogen torch with which he was working.

The dimness of the laboratory was illumined at intervals by tiny puffs of light. They were queer little puffs. Each of them seemed no bigger than the head of a pin. Sheets of asbestos partly shrouded them. But the light of them puffed up to the ceiling. Queer little puffs indeed! Olaf seemed not only to see, but to feel them, each a tiny wave that seemed to strike at him like a blow.

He found himself covered with sweat. It rolled in torrents down his great hairy chest so that one of his hands fumbled at his throat as though he were stifling.

"I've got it, Olaf," Argon was murmuring. "You felt that last one? The secret of the sun! That was less than a hundredth of a grain, and it went to ninety-eight hundred. Why, I can run it into millions!"

Millions! Untold wealth! With only one million Olaf would have everything in life that he could want!

What was the secret of the sun? He wondered about it detachedly.

"Olaf! Hand me that insulator. Hurry!"

At the direct command, Stevens lumbered to his feet. He was trembling; bathed in hot sweat. But it wasn't fear that made his heart pound. Just excitement and eagerness. Now was the time!

"Insulator?" he mumbled. "Which is it?" Like a great gorilla he shambled forward, his arms dangling.

"That white cone over there." Argon gestured at a large white cone that stood on a table across the room.

"I'm going to try nearly half a grain and keep it wholly sheathed," he added. "Just the magna-thermite and the thermo-gauge inside the cone when the reaction takes place."

Stevens brought the cone. His fingers twitched as he gripped it—fingers that in a minute or two would grip little Dr. Argon's throat—squeezing—strangling.

But what was this secret of the sun? He must be sure that he would know how to complete the experiment. Not with just tiny fractions of grains; but with the whole mass of intricate chemicals which Argon had prepared. And maybe, even, Olaf would be able to prepare still more. The retorts with their mixing mechanisms were there on the bench.

Argon had been connecting the big cone to his apparatus at the center of the table. The cone was raised a foot or two, clamped into a lowering mechanism over the strange-looking little slablike tray, where infinitesimal fragments of the chemicals lay mixed, ready for the tiny ignition which would unite them.

"Dr. Argon," Olaf said suddenly, "I do not understand all this. What are your chemicals? How does it work? What is this secret of the sun?"

Argon paused to wrinkle up his thin seamed face. He grinned.

"My secret, Olaf," he said. "Mine—and the sun's. But when I demonstrate—I can get it up to a full grain at least, with the apparatus I have here—when I demonstrate my results to the world of science, no longer will anyone say that old Argon is mad!"

Was Dr. Argon mad? Doubt assailed the big stolid Olaf so that for several moments he almost felt that he might lose this treasure which now was almost within his grasp. People said that Argon was demented, what with his vague talk of the secret of the sun, and his eccentric hermitlike habits. Dr. Argon should have had a skilled, trained assistant. But he had chosen Olaf. And Stevens knew why. Because Dr. Argon was not demented, but in reality a canny businessman. He would not trust any assistant with this treasure.

"It looks very wonderful," Olaf said quietly. "How does it work? With that little switch?"

Dr. Argon now had started the mechanism which would lower the big insulating cone. He shut off the tiny ray of sunlight and trained the big spectroscope on the table.

"I'll take a spectrograph of this," he said. "We'll be sure now that the spectrum band is the same as from sunlight."

The pencil-ray of sunlight now gone, the laboratory became a little darker. The retorts where Argon was preparing more of his chemicals gave off a lurid green sheen. Olaf's broad

nostrils were dilating with the chemical smells. The whole place was so weird it had always given him a vague uneasiness. He felt that now, more than ever; and the hot sweat poured down on him.

Dr. Argon glanced at him, laughed.

“Good Lord, big fellow, you look frightened to death. This isn’t a monster that’s going to jump at you.” Argon’s laugh died to a grim chuckle. “Well, as a matter of fact, that’s just about what it is,” he added. “But this is a little monster—the cone will hold it. Watch now.”

“But what are you doing?” Stevens urged. “Those chemicals—”

“You won’t understand me,” Argon said.

“But I’ll try, sir.”

The old chemist grinned.

“All right. I started with aluminum, which I brought into contact and united by ignition with an oxide of a chemically weaker metal. With an ordinary oxide, and just plain aluminum, I would get what is known as thermite. The aluminum combines with the oxygen of the oxide. But my reaction goes further, into what I might call magna-thermite of infinite yielding capacity. I am using an aluminum alloy of my own preparation, and an unusual oxide alloy. I discovered both their gases on the sun. You can see them in the spectroscope band—if you’re clever enough to identify what you’re seeing.”

He pointed to his micro-scales. Stevens saw small piles of finely powdered chemicals, one gleaming white, the other a dirty gray.

“My mechanism ignites the mixture,” he added. “That’s simple. I guess you can understand that all right.” He indicated his little apparatus under the poised cone. “That cone automatically drops a second before the ignition.”

“I understand,” Stevens murmured.

Dr. Argon nodded. He did not see Olaf’s eyes gleaming; he did not notice Olaf’s big twitching hands.

“The difficulty,” Dr. Argon said, “has been to construct my apparatus to be impervious to the reaction. That table slab—that little tray—the very bulb of the thermostat itself—all of them have to be within the cone. It took me four years to devise the materials of which those things are made. Stand back, now—”

Olaf recoiled. His mind was trying to grasp it all. Two tiny fragments of chemicals. That little ignition timer and switch. The timer and the switch that would drop the cone. It was so simple. And now Olaf noticed exactly which of the little black buttons Dr. Argon was pressing in the row on the mechanism panel.

“Now—ten seconds,” the scientist murmured.

The cone lowered. Argon jumped up and shifted until he was standing with his back against Olaf, his head hardly above the servant’s shoulders.

“Now—watch—”

Breathlessly, Olaf watched. Under the big white cone there seemed a tiny puff. A little bigger than the others had been, perhaps. The cone did not stir. But something invisible struck at Argon and Stevens—a great wave of something. Then it was gone; there was only a stifling, breathless feeling, with a clammy sweat trickling down Olaf’s chest and legs.

“Good!” Dr. Argon exclaimed. “It was all right! Everything held.” He darted toward the gauge of one of his big instruments, which had a tiny tube that connected with the cone.

“Over ten thousand!” Argon exclaimed. “That’s with nearly half a grain of the oxide but only a hundredth grain of the other. Now I’m getting an idea of the proportions. That’s all I’ll try for at the present. The cone held it—but look what it did.”

The big cone was no longer white. In places on the outside it was ragged and dirty gray-black—pitted and scarred.

“I took a spectrograph of that one,” Argon said eagerly. “Just to prove that the lines are the same. Thermo-infinity. The sun’s secret, and mine. Why, this will revolutionize the world! This will—”

He was hardly aware of Olaf springing at him, like a great snarling animal. And then he felt Olaf’s big fingers on his throat.

“Why—” he gasped. “My God—” But his voice choked as Olaf squeezed tightly with a strangling grip. Argon’s frail little body collapsed backward, so that he fell on his back with Stevens kneeling on him.

It was a chaos to the snarling Olaf, his big fingers tightening on the scrawny throat; his heavy knee pinning the squirming, struggling little body. The eerie light from the instruments showed Argon’s face, with its popping eyes and open mouth. Then the body was only twitching; the eyes became glazed . . . Olaf relaxed. Dr. Argon’s body lay still.

The thing was done! So easy. For a moment big Olaf Stevens crouched, panting with triumph; and then he lumbered to his feet. The huge retort of molten metal at the end of the work-bench was half full, its contents bubbling sluggishly. After Olaf had secured the treasure he would pour that liquid metal on Argon’s face and throat. It would sear the flesh away like a blow-torch held to a tub of butter. There would be nothing left to show that the scientist had died of strangling. Anyone would say that a laboratory accident had killed him.

Olaf was trembling with eagerness as he poked around the intricate maze of Argon’s apparatus. He was convinced that Argon had been creating a new substance. Some of it should be here—the result of those tiny puffs; the product of the chemical reaction which had taken place under the big white insulating cone.

Olaf’s eyes brightened as once more he thought of the treasure. A substance new to Earth, of course it was worth many times its weight in gold. Olaf would gather it up and create more of it. He would hide it all; then take it back to his European homeland. He would wait a year or so, and then produce it and sell it. Riches for Olaf Stevens, at last.

But disappointment swept him. There was no trace here of any new substance. Was that because Argon’s experiments had been on so small a scale? Of course! A hundredth of a grain, he had said. And that last big one—still not half a grain. Half a grain was nothing sizable to yield any treasure!

His disappointment was only momentary. Here under his eyes lay the two piles of powdered chemicals which Argon had so laboriously prepared. A gleaming white pile, and one which was dirty gray. Stevens knew how to unite them in larger quantities.

His big hands were shaking a little as he carefully mixed the two mounds of chemicals and put them on the slablike tray under the big cone. Soon the treasure would lie here.

The mechanism of the raised cone hummed steadily as he started the timer. Everything that Argon had done was clear in his mind. His fingers pressed the correct button of the timing-ignition.

Big Olaf Stevens stood back, watching eagerly as the cone smoothly descended. Ten seconds, Argon had said. Only ten seconds now, and he would possess the treasure.

Thousands and thousands of times more of it than Argon had ever created. . . .

Ten seconds can be an eternity of eager, tumbling thoughts. Olaf's mind went back to his boyhood home, the little village at the foot of the mountain with the great glacier in its ragged gash. And his thoughts flashed ahead to when he would be there again. People would say, "Olaf is a wonderful fellow. So clever—"

It may be that Stevens was aware that the ten seconds finished with a chaos under the white insulating cone—a flashing chaos that engulfed the cone and the table—engulfed the entire eerie laboratory. There was just a split second when Olaf's senses were able perhaps to record a prismatic glare in which the room—the house—everything—was melting into chaos. Then for Olaf Stevens there was only nothingness; and whatever of the unknown that comes to one who has entered Eternity. . . .

"The house must have stood just about in the center," someone said. "Good Lord, it's hot here—let's get back."

In little awed groups, people were gathered at the edge of a great circular pit. Night had come. The yellow-red light of the molten earth and rocks, forty or fifty feet down in the pit, glowed eerily over the lonely hilltop and painted the rising smoke and gases with a lurid glare. Beyond the pit, the rocky ground was blackened; the edges of the encroaching woods down the hill showed naked, blackened tree-trunks.

In another group of men, at another point near the lip of the glaring molten abyss, a young scientist stood with several of the police and town officials.

"Yes, I knew him," the young scientist was saying. "Secretive old fellow. Always thought he was a little off—harping about some secret of the sun that he was after."

"But what do you think now?" one of the officials demanded.

The young scientist's grim smile faded.

"The most intense heat that we have ever created on Earth and measured," he said, "well perhaps it's something over four or five thousand degrees Fahrenheit, and the temperature at the surface of the sun is believed to be about sixteen thousand degrees. But that is infinitesimal compared to the sun's center, where undoubtedly there is a temperature of millions of degrees.

"How is that immense heat created and maintained? Well, that is the secret of the sun. A contraction of the mass upon itself, some say. But others think it is perhaps a form of radioactivity. Or perhaps the combining of chemical elements of a nature as yet unknown to us."

"And Argon discovered the nature of those elements? Or some new way of combining them?" somebody suggested.

The young scientist shrugged. "Perhaps he did. We have a hint of the process, in everyday commercial chemistry—the creation of thermite. The oxygen of an oxide is made to combine with aluminum. An enormous heat is generated by that reaction—heat that is commercially used for welding. I imagine Argon was working along those lines. He was always hinting at what he called magna-thermite. And talking about his goal being thermo-infinity."

Glare from the molten rocks down in the pit painted the young scientist's face and showed that he was smiling.

"Argon wasn't trying to create any tangible substance like a treasure, as some people thought. He was generating heat. More and more intense heat, with thermo-infinity as his

theoretical goal. There is a mathematical limit to coldness—absolute zero, where molecular vibration ceases. But there is no mathematical limit to rapidity of vibration—no limit, theoretically, to heat.”

The young scientist was gazing with awe down at the molten glare.

“Argon must have created about a million degrees of concentrated heat here,” he added. “A small concentration of the greatest heat that man has ever created on Earth!”

The secret of the sun. Olaf Stevens had demonstrated it perfectly!

[The end of *Secret of the Sun* by Raymond King Cummings]