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New Worlds to Conquer

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Alice, Where Art Thou?

By

John Russell Fearn

Writing under the pseudonym Volsted Gridban.

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“Rod, I’m frightened! This business is still going on even though I haven’t worn the ring. I’ve lost dimensions again in the night—I had some terrible dreams too. I seemed to be flying through space or something . . .”

This is the strange story of Alice Denham, whom I should have married ten years ago but did not. At the time, as some of the older amongst you will remember, there was quite a stir when Alice disappeared. I was even very close to being accused of her murder, along with Dr. Earl Page. The only reason we escaped was because no trace could be found of Alice’s body—and according to law, no body—no accusation. Instead the case of Alice became relegated to one of those “peculiar” stories, such as footprints mysteriously ceasing to advance through unbroken snow.

I did not give the real facts concerning Alice ten years ago because I knew I would never be believed, nor Dr. Page either. The thing was—and still is—so incredible. And yet it happened.

Suppose we go back to the beginning? My name is Rodney Fletcher. Ten years ago I had just started business on my own as a stockbroker and had every prospect of a successful business career. Today I am comparatively well-to-do, but still unmarried. There can never be anybody to take the place of Alice, as far as I am concerned.

It was just after I had set up in business that I first met Alice. She was a slim, elfin-type of girl with a wealth of blonde hair, smoke-grey eyes, and a tremendous amount of enthusiasm. She first came sailing into my orbit when I advertised for a secretary-receptionist. I had little hesitation over engaging her and in the space of a year she had become the supervisor of my ever-increasing clerical staff.

Inevitably I was drawn to her, and she to me. We exchanged confidences, we dined together. Our friendship deepened into romance; then one warm spring evening at twilight, as we were strolling through the city to keep a theatre date together, we decided to become engaged.

At the time of this decision, which did not come as a surprise to either of us, we were just passing the brilliantly lighted window of a famous city jeweller’s. I think it was the sight of a certain ring that prompted the abrupt decision to become engaged.

That certain ring! If only to God we’d never seen it! If only we had taken another street But of what avail now to try and turn back the clock? There the ring was—compelling, seeming even to beckon us to look at it. We even forgot for the moment that we had decided to become engaged. Fixedly we looked at that ring. We wondered about it. We exchanged glances of awe.

The ring had been cunningly placed in the centre of the resplendent window so that it automatically attracted the eye. Around it were grouped trays of diamond rings, together with

pendants of sapphires, rubies, opals, and all the stock in trade of a high-class jeweller. The shop was still open and within, when at last we managed to drag our eyes from the ring, we could see a glimpse of an elderly man silently writing something in a ledger.

“Did you *ever* see anything like it, Rod?”

Alice’s gentle, fascinated voice brought my attention back to the ring. The circlet holding the stone was normal enough and made of platinum, but the stone itself was as large as a small pea and radiated colours in a fashion neither of us had even seen before. From the countless facets there flooded a blazing emerald green one moment, or ruby-red the next. We had only to move position by a fraction of an inch and the colour changed again. Once even it seemed to me that there were faint glimpses of colours not within the normal spectrum, colours which one sensed rather than saw. Yet how am I to describe a colour which has no normal parallel? By and large, the stone looked as though it were a composite of all precious gems rolled into one. Quite definitely, neither of us had ever seen anything like it.

And we had just become engaged. Was there anything illogical in the fact that we finally turned into the shop and asked to see the masterpiece at close quarters?

“Ah, yes—the Sunstone,” the jeweller said, smiling, and put aside his ledger. “Quite a remarkable gem . . .”

He opened the barred cagework at the back of the window and with exquisite care lifted the ring, complete on its plush display case. Still very gently he set it down on the glass-topped counter before us. And all Alice and I could do was stare at it, just as though it possessed some incredible hypnotic quality.

It had no such powers, of course: it was simply that the unearthly, blazing lustres held the eye with a magnetism all their own.

“A wonderful, wonderful stone,” came the jeweller’s voice, and at that I forced myself to look at him. He was an intellectual-looking man of late middle age, with thick white hair curling at his temples.

“Where did it come from?” I asked. “I don’t think I ever saw anything like it!”

“To the best of my knowledge, sir, and I have checked very carefully, it is the only specimen of its kind in the world. It was found originally in South America, became a sacred gem to a race now long forgotten, and eventually fell into the hands of an explorer. After that it travelled considerably, leaving quite a history everywhere it went.”

“A history?” Alice questioned. “What sort of history, apart from its natural beauty?”

“A history which I find very hard to credit, madam,” the jeweller smiled. “Or perhaps that is because I am too mature to be gullible. It *does* appear, though, that every owner of this ring up to now has vanished.”

“Oh?” Alice looked surprised. “Vanished? To where?”

“That is what is so strange. Nobody seems to know. The ring has remained, but the various owners have disappeared—nor have they ever been traced . . . Of course,” the jeweller continued, perhaps realising he was jeopardising his chance of a sale, “it may all be a lot of nonsense and probably is. Just superstitious gossip, such as often does attach to a gem of unusual qualities. However, through various trade processes it finally came into my possession, and I am glad to say that in the two months I have possessed it I have not disappeared!”

Somehow it was a relief to laugh. And the ring still blazed up at us from its deep amethyst plush case . . . After a moment Alice withdrew her glove and reached a pale, slender hand tentatively forward.

“May I?” she questioned, and the jeweller quietly pushed the case towards her.

“By all means, madam. I have never yet seen how it looks on the finger of a woman.”

With my help Alice slid the ring experimentally on the third finger of her right hand. Then she held her hand forward and turned it back and forth so the ring caught the lights. And the effect was breathtaking. It looked exactly as though sheer emerald and ruby fire were burning her finger away.

“Exquisite! Exquisite!” This seemed to be the only word she could whisper.

“But on the wrong finger,” I smiled.

“So—an engagement?” the jeweller asked. “I do congratulate you. I am sure no other woman will ever possess so exquisite an engagement ring, madam.”

Alice looked a little embarrassed, gently eased the ring from her finger, and put it back in the case. The jeweller waited, apparently sensing by some business instinct that he had made a sale even though the ring was back where it had started.

“It must be frightfully expensive,” Alice said, and at that I imagine I looked indignant. Certainly I felt it.

“Who cares about that? I don’t want the woman I love to wear *any* sort of trash . . . What *is* the figure?” I turned to the jeweller.

“As rings go it is not expensive, sir. Besides, its odd history, be it true or false, forbids a high figure . . . The price is one thousand pounds.”

I suppose that should have been a shock, but it was not. I mentally decided that should the need arise—which I considered highly unlikely—I would be more than able to get my money back by selling the ring. One always has to pay to be unique, so I made out my cheque there and then and handed it over. My business card was sufficient guarantee to the jeweller that I was a man of standing—and so we departed. Alice and I, she with the ring now on the third finger of her left hand and her smile one of ecstatic satisfaction.

“I shall never forget this evening as long as I live,” she murmured, as we went on our way to the theatre. “Engaged, and the possessor of the most wonderful ring in the world—all in one fell swoop.”

“Nothing but the best for the best,” I told her.

So we kept our theatre date, but throughout the performance our attention kept wandering to that blaze of glory on Alice’s slim hand. For that matter we were not the only ones looking at it. In our position in the orchestra stall we were close enough for the foremost members of the play to see us with some distinctness. I could not help but notice the fascinated stare of the young heroine as her eye caught that shimmering grandeur below. So fascinated was she she nearly forgot her lines!

Yes, as Alice had said, that evening was a wonderful, memorable one. As for the strange story which went with the ring, we neither of us gave it another thought. We were both supremely happy, and before I parted from Alice towards midnight we had arranged to be married within a month. There seemed to be no point in a long engagement since we both knew exactly what we intended doing . . . From this day forward she would cease to be a member of my stockbroking firm and make her arrangements for the great day.

On the following morning I was at the office as usual, too many business matters on my mind to give much thought to the aptly named “Sunstone”. I was reminded of it, however, when towards evening Alice rang me up.

“Hello, darling!” I exclaimed, delighted to hear her voice again. “Everything fine?”

“No, Rod, not quite. That’s why I’m ringing you. I’m—I’m a bit worried.”

“What about? Nothing that can’t be straightened out, surely?”

“Well, I——” The hesitation in her gentle voice puzzled me more than somewhat. “I wonder if you could spare the time to come over? There’s something happened that’s—not quite as it should be.”

“Spare the time!” I echoed. “Nothing could keep me away. I’ll come immediately.”

Which I did. And I was inwardly shocked to find Alice’s small, elfin-like face looking very pale and pinched. She seemed to have lost a great deal of her normal pink-and-white colour. As I stood looking at her I was seized with the curious conviction that she appeared far more frail and small than ever before. Never a big woman at any time, she seemed definitely to have lost proportions overnight! Ridiculous, of course! Probably the light, or something.

“What is it?” I asked her quietly.

She sank down on the divan and did not speak for a moment—then with a little touch of the dramatic she held out her left hand and shook it. Immediately the amazing ring on her third finger fell to the floor and lay blazing on the carpet. I stood there and just stared for a moment or two.

“How—how did you *do* that?” I demanded abruptly. “You just shook it off! That isn’t possible, Alice. Last night, in the jeweller’s, it only just fitted you.”

“I know, Rod. It seems to have expanded, or something.”

Alice gave me a queer look. Stooping, I picked the ring from the carpet and tested it on the end of my little finger. I had done the same thing the previous evening before giving it to her. The ring had not expanded in the least! A curious thought began to snake through my brain.

Catching at her slim hand I stared at it. I could have sworn it was far more slender and whiter than ever before.

“Alice!” I looked at her intently. “Alice, what’s wrong?”

She shook her head. “How should I know? I seem to have lost weight and size overnight! I’ve been wearing this ring ever since you put it on my finger and—well, you’ve seen for yourself how slackly it fits.” She gave a shrug and looked at me with hollow eyes. “Oh, what’s the use of trying to disguise it, Rod? My clothes don’t fit as well as they did yesterday. I’ve lost size in many ways. Even this belt about my dress is a notch further in than usual!”

Still I gazed at her, totally unable to figure the business out. I said, “It’s impossible!” without realizing that I had said it.

To this Alice made no comment; then coming to a sudden decision I took Alice’s arm and had her stand over by the wall.

“Flatten yourself against it,” I ordered. “I’m going to check up. What height is recorded on your Civil Registration Card?”

She nodded to the bureau. “Top shelf—left pigeon hole.” In a moment or two I had the card out. Here, for once, the new law to register the dimensions, size, fingerprints, and so forth of every citizen was going to prove useful. It gave Alice’s height at five feet two inches, and her weight as seven and a half stones.

“Kick off your shoes,” I told her, returning to her side.

She obeyed and stood waiting. Then, with a book on top of her head and a tape measure in my hand I went to work. I made the measurement three times because I just could not believe what the measure said. She was now only five feet tall.

“Well?” she asked, as I stood thinking—and I made a quick evasion.

“Everything seems all right. What about your weight? Got a scale in the bathroom?”

She nodded and we went in to check up. Here, I had no chance to be evasive for she could see the face of the scale as well as I could. She was exactly one stone lighter in weight.

Her smoke-gray eyes were scared as she looked at me. “Rod, what does it mean? Why have I altered like this? *Is* my height any different? For heaven’s sake be frank with me!”

I put an arm about her shoulders. “Matter of fact you’re two inches shorter.”

“But why on earth should I be? What’s caused it?”

“I—don’t—know.” I was having a hard struggle to conceal my inward alarm. “Something to do with the ring, perhaps. I don’t think there’s anything to worry about,” I added quickly. “After all, people do lose weight sometimes very quickly, particularly after severe emotional strain. Maybe our getting engaged was more of a tax on your nerves than you thought.”

“That would not make me lose two inches of height, would it?”

By this time we had returned to the lounge and Alice had put her shoes on again before I had thought of an answer.

“At night, Alice, a human frame is less in height than it is in the morning because the gristle in the backbone compresses under the pull of gravity.”

“Rod, you’re a very bad liar.” Alice looked at me gravely. “You’re not fooling me one little bit, you know, even though I appreciate your trying to spare my feelings. The fact remains that I am less in size in every way and I’ve got to know *why!*”

I picked up the ring from where I had placed it on the occasional table. I turned it over slowly. To both of us it was no longer a thing of beauty but something to be feared and hated. Finally I wrapped it in my handkerchief and thrust it in my pocket.

“Frankly,” I confessed, “this whole business is much too deep for me!”

“And for me! I keep thinking of the story the jeweler told us—about all the previous owners having disappeared. He didn’t say in what *manner* they had disappeared, and it’s sort of left me wondering . . . if . . .”

“Forget that poppycock!” I said brusquely. “Just a lot of rubbish. Won’t do you any good to brood over such stuff. Tell you what we can do. I know a Professor Earl Page, and he’s a pretty good physicist. Member of the same club as I am. Just a chance this business may be scientific and that he can explain it away. Grab your hat and coat and we’ll go and see. My car’s outside.”

As we drove through the busy streets I reflected on the usefulness of knowing Earl Page, PhD. Though not an outstanding figure in the scientific world, he certainly knew his job when it came to scientific analysis. Indeed, his choice lay so obviously in the exploration of little known things that his fame was thereby obscured. Not that he cared. A man with half a million for his private income can be obscure in comfort.

Page looked decidedly surprised when the manservant showed Alice and me into the well appointed library. He was by the window under the reading lamp, the light etching out his sharp features and neatly trimmed black torpedo-beard and moustache. One could easily have mistaken him for a Frenchman.

Getting to his feet he came over to us—a small, concise man with a perpetual slight smile which revealed the white of teeth through his beard.

“Hello, Rod! Quite a little while since I’ve seen you.”

“Been busy,” I said, and promptly introduced Alice. This done, and the handshakes over, Page stood with his hands plunged in the pockets of his velvet smoking jacket whilst I gave

him the story in detail. At the end of it he made no comment for a moment or two; then he looked at us with his small, keen blue eyes.

“Quite a remarkable story! Without any apparent explanation beyond the acquisition of a strange gem, you, Miss Denham, start to lose weight and height, eh? Unique! Most unique! Let me have a look at it, Rod.”

I handed over the handkerchief containing the ring, and then added: “Better take care how you deal with it!”

“I can assure you I shan’t take any chances. Come along with me, both of you.”

He led the way from his library to the small laboratory at the end of the hall. Floodlights came up automatically as the door opened. Removing the ring from the handkerchief with insulated forceps, Page put it under the electron microscope and peered intently. He spent nearly five minutes doing this, adjusting the instrument and murmuring under his breath. But the perpetual smile was still there when he glanced up.

“I assume,” he asked, “that you are under the impression that the rays from this stone are simply prismatic light-rays, like those of the diamond?”

“Well, aren’t they?” I asked, surprised.

He shook his head, coming slowly forward. “No. This gem is the most amazing thing upon which I have ever set eyes Most stones rely on their light-wave dissemination for their beauty—such as the diamond, ruby, sapphire, and so forth. On the other hand, stones of the opal class are absorptive of light. Here, however, is a gem of rare properties in that it radiates not only light waves but *ether* waves!”

Alice and I gazed, uncomprehending. Page continued.

“I hardly need to tell you, do I, that the air and space itself abound in different radiations such as heat, cosmic rays, radio waves, and so forth? So far we know of no mineral structure which will split up and radiate any of these radiations. Our limit is stones which re-radiate light-waves with rare beauty. But here is a stone apparently with *natural facets*, which re-radiates cosmic waves, and perhaps dozens of other radiations of which we know nothing. It splits them up prismatically, hence the unholy lustre and the suggestion that here and there are colours we’ve never yet encountered. The dominant blue is, I think, caused by the breaking up of ultra-violet; and the red is derived from infra-red.”

“But what has all this to do with Alice?” I demanded.

“I don’t quite know—yet.” But I fancied from his expression that he did. “Most certainly she had better not wear that ring again. I shall try and get a better light on its history from the jeweller from whom you bought it. The point is, that a stone like this able to re-radiate various waves may be utilising some that are harmful to a human being. If the ring is no longer worn the trouble should cease”

As he had been talking Page had led us back into the library. “Now,” he continued seriously, “you can rest assured that I’ll find out all I can about it. The implications of this ring may be far-reaching. Now you have ceased to wear it, Miss Denham, I think you ought to be perfectly all right.”

“Well, that’s something,” Alice admitted. “But what about the stone in weight and two inches in height which have gone into nowhere? Will they return?”

“Candidly, I just don’t know!”

Alice gave a rueful smile. “Even at five feet two I always felt pretty small. Now I feel positively microscopic!”

“*Petite*, and as sweet as ever,” I smiled, my arm about her shoulders.

“If there *should* be any further developments, come and see me immediately,” Page advised. “In fact, perhaps both of you had better drop in tomorrow evening and I’ll be able to tell you how I’ve progressed.”

On that note we left matters. Alice said little as I drove her home, but I could tell that she was still very much alarmed. Nor was I much better myself. There had been something in Earl Page’s manner which to me—knowing him extremely well—had implied that he knew most of the truth but had not dared to tell it

And the next day my alarm was sharpened considerably when immediately after breakfast, before I had set off for town, Alice rang me. Her voice was shaken with nervousness.

“Rod, I’m frightened! This business is still going on even though I haven’t worn the ring! I’ve lost dimensions again in the night—I had some terrible dream, too. I seemed to be flying through space, or something—”

“I’ll come right away,” I interrupted. “Keep a grip on yourself, sweetheart. I’ll soon be with you.”

I only stayed long enough to leave directions at the office, then I was on my way again to Alice’s flat as fast as the car would go and this time, as she opened the door to me, I could behold the diminution clearly.

Alice’s clothes were hanging baggily on her lessened figure. She was doll-like, fragile, and pitifully frightened. From her gaunt, weary face it was plain what sort of a night she had been through. The moment she saw me she caught hold of my arm and hung on to it as though afraid to let go.

“All right,” I murmured, embracing her gently. “Take it easy, darling. We’ll get this mess cleared up somehow. Let’s go and see Page right away.”

When we arrived at Page’s home he was in dressing gown and slippers, finishing his breakfast. His expression immediately became grim as his eyes travelled to Alice.

“Sit down, both of you” He called for extra coffee and then proceeded slowly. “I called on the jeweller last evening but apparently he could not add anything to what you had already told me. I then browsed through the library and read up all I could find concerning gems—without result. The ‘Sunstone’ is not even mentioned. So I had to fall back on an analysis of my own”

The extra coffee was brought and Page resumed. “I spent most of last night making tests. As I at first thought, the gem *does* transmit radiations of all kinds. If a low-powered radio beam be directed at it it reflects it again as a mirror does light. Absolutely uncanny! However, from the gem there is radiating a wavelength of such exceptional smallness that I cannot place it even with instruments—unless I accept the most unbelievable proposition ever heard of.”

“And what’s that?” I asked bluntly.

“That the wavelength is being generated from somewhere inconceivably small and invisible to us. The wavelength also has a power which has a surprising effect on flesh-and-blood organisms. A white mouse which I put beside the ring for the night has *decreased in size!*”

Alice and I looked at each other anxiously. The coffee cups we were holding in our hands remained ignored.

“Strangely enough,” Page continued, “the effect continues even when the ring is removed. That seems to show that once the effect—whatever it is—is absorbed into a living system it continues to exert its influence—”

“Then what happens to *me*?” Alice cried in horror. “At least tell me that! I’ve got to know!”

Page came forward and looked down at her seriously. “Believe me, Miss Denham, I wish I could give you the details, but for the moment I just don’t know them. I’m fighting something I never even heard of before! I will be able to form a better prognosis when I have studied the final reactions of the mouse. In the meantime, if you can make arrangements to stay here, where I can keep you under observation, I may be able to do something for you. Think you can manage that?”

“Anything! Anything at all!”

“Good! I’ll instruct my housekeeper to make the necessary arrangements. Be back here about noon with everything you require, then we’ll go into the matter thoroughly.”

He accompanied us as far as the hall, scribbled something on a card, and pushed it in my pocket whilst Alice’s back was turned. Once I had left Alice at her flat with the promise to return to her at noon after a call at the office, I read what had been written on the card. It was not reassuring.

“Return immediately before Miss Denham. Very important that I should see you.”

So, with dire expectations of something dreadful, I went back immediately to Page’s home—and he wasted no time in coming to the point now Alice was not present to hear the details.

“Rod, your fiancée is unwittingly fighting something of baleful power! Unless my guess is entirely wrong, that jewel is being operated upon by powers in the microcosm.”

“Microcosm?” I repeated vaguely. “I’m a stockbroker, Earl, not a scientist.”

“I’m sorry,” he apologised. “I’m referring to the atomic world, which on an inconceivably small scale duplicates our known universe. It is quite possible that there might be highly intelligent beings in this microcosm, existing upon an electron. However, since an electron is basically an electric charge, the only assumption we can draw is that the denizens of such an electron-world must themselves be electrical. Possibly even electric charges possessing intelligence.”

“Intelligent *electricity*! Dammit, man, that’s stretching things a bit, isn’t it?”

He smiled wistfully. “Is it? *We* are intelligent electricity, too, remember! Maybe that startles you?”

It certainly did! Yet when I came to think of it I could see he was right. Everything material, including human and animal organisms, is based on electric forces. So after a while his idea did not seem so extraordinary after all.

“And you believe these electrical inhabitants of an electron world may be operating through the Sunstone?”

“I think so, yes. The action of the wavelengths makes me think that, but the *purpose* of it I just do not understand! It is not remotely possible that Miss Denham was deliberately singled out. I believe the whole thing was pure chance, and that she happened to be the recipient of these minute wavelengths.”

“And not only Alice,” I exclaimed, startled. “All the other owners of the ring disappeared, too!”

“That,” Page said, “is what is so disquieting.”

A thought suddenly struck me. "What of the countless others who must have handled the gem? Even the jeweller himself for that matter! Nothing happened—'least not to him."

"As to that, they didn't have it continuously in contact with their flesh for over twelve hours. There was no effect on the mouse either until twelve hours had passed. I had the ring fastened tightly against its body, by the way. You will recall that only the *owners* of the ring have vanished—that is those who must have *worn* it. We do not hear anything untoward about those who transferred it from place to place."

"Of all the damnable, horrific gems to be let loose in the world!" I breathed. "It's more deadly than the most virulent poison! It's so—so utterly beautiful, yet so fiendishly diabolical!"

"Very true," Page sighed, thinking.

"What you are telling me. Earl, is that somebody of incredible scientific ingenuity, living on an electronic charge—or plant—deliberately sent that gem into our vastly greater universe and thereafter used it for the transmission of certain inexplicable wavelengths which cause shrinkage. Is that it?"

"That's it."

"I don't see how that is possible." I gave a frown. "This gem must be countless millions of times larger than the world from which they sent it! How do you reconcile that?"

"There's a simple parallel," he answered. "Our modern scientists, by a play of vibrations upon certain mineral substances, can change the mineral gradually into a totally different atomic structure. For instance, they can change carbon into hard diamonds, and that's only one example . . . These electronic men of science, unseen, somewhere in the microcosm, have obviously transmitted from their world a series of vibrations to the extreme limit of their universe, knowing full well that beyond it must lie the greater macrocosm in which spins our world——"

"Why *our* world," I interrupted. "Are there not tens of millions of worlds to choose from?"

"Certainly, but ours—as far as we know at present—is the only one with intelligent—I say *intelligent*—life. Hence Earth was, I suggest, singled out. The concentrated force of those vibrations reacted on some part of our world, perhaps determined beforehand, to produce a combination of chemicals which formed into the Sunstone. That, I believe, is what happened . . ."

I must have looked very doubting, for Page added: "The fact that they *can* do it is proved because they can still send vibrations through it even now, no matter where it is moved. That shows conclusively that the radiations are chained by some magnetic power or other to the jewel wherever it may be. Mighty science, Rod! Science pressed to its ultimate power for a reason we do not as yet understand. But we shall! I wanted to tell you all this in private. Once Miss Denham is with us again I may not have the opportunity and it would be nonsensical to alarm her unduly. By examination, tests, and research I may yet solve the mystery and save her."

"There are no two ways about it!" I cried. "The alternative to saving her is unthinkable!"

Page clapped me on the shoulder. "We'll see what we can do and needless to say, not a word to her!"

And so I departed to pick up Alice from her flat. I still do not know how I managed to keep a reasonably cheerful face on things, considering what I had heard. I was a victim to the

knowledge that overwhelming forces had suddenly sprung into being, and the whole damned issue of them seemed to be concentrated entirely on the woman I held most dear . . .

Naturally, I made arrangements so that I too could stay with Page and be beside Alice in case of urgent need. There was at least a cold yet reassuring efficiency about Page which was wonderfully heartening to both Alice and me. Indeed, her understandable fears abated considerably under Page's calm watchfulness.

From noon onwards until early evening he was the perfect host, never once mentioning the matter closest to our minds—but in that time I noticed how skilfully he wormed his way into Alice's confidence, how he watched her constantly whilst not appearing to be doing so, how his adding-machine brain made a note of her every movement and reaction.

We dined at seven, talked for another hour, and then at Page's suggestion went to the laboratory. Immediately he went into action. With his quick, capable hands he set about arranging his instruments, asking for and receiving the fullest co-operation from Alice. Neither of us understood much of what he did, though we certainly watched in fascinated interest . . . He used X-ray screens and took several plates; he tied elastic bandages around Alice's arm, in the fashion of a blood-pressure test—the difference being that in this case he attached electrodes to the bandage and then stood watching pensively as needles jumped in a panel of dials. He made notes by the score and went to work with other machines which bristled with tubes, coils of wire, insulator banks, and multiple switches.

His final experiment did not concern Alice at all but the frightened and very much shrunken white mouse, and lastly the Sunstone itself. That deadly gem still shone with its unholy and transcendently beautiful lustre.

At last Page was finished. He stood with his hands plunged in the pockets of his velvet jacket, beard touching his chest as he pondered.

"The facts," he said finally, "are not reassuring! There is nothing to be gained by evasion."

"Nothing at all," Alice agreed quietly, a tremor in her voice. "What is it all about, Dr. Page? Since I am the victim I am entitled to know. I don't want promises or put-offs. I simply want to know where I stand."

"It is only because I think I might be able to save you that I am going to tell you what is happening," Page replied. "In the first place, Miss Denham, the electric content of your body is three times that of normal. You did not know that, did you?"

"I certainly didn't. Would it explain a slight feeling of cramp all over me?"

"A mild pins-and-needles effect? Yes, that would explain it. Because you had that gem in close contact with your body for over twelve hours certain wavelengths have operated through it—wavelengths generated from somewhere in what we call the microcosm . . ." Page went into an explanation very similar to the one he had given me, except that it was "watered down" especially not to frighten Alice too much; then he continued: "This radiation has altered the normal electrical content of your body to such an extent that there is a distinct magnetism. I cannot work out the exact intricacies involved, but it seems that this magnetism is causing a closing-up of the electronic orbits which make up the molecular units of your body. As these close, you shrink. Is that clear?"

Alice nodded, even though she looked completely bewildered. "Then what makes it progress? Why didn't it cease once the ring was taken out of the way?"

"Because the effect was by then stabilised. The electric content had been supplied to cause the alteration and it simply goes on functioning. And *will* go on functioning— Therefore,

we must set to work to find a counteractive radiation which will arrest the trouble, or at least produce a negative result on the extra electricity absorbed into your body. Somehow we will find it, Miss Denham. Don't worry! This whole business has been devised by a brilliant science for an obscure reason, but I've one or two ideas of my own yet to try out"

Page stood for a moment or two, considering, then he said: "I believe you mentioned you had strange dreams last night?"

"I did, yes, and I cannot understand what they meant. It seemed to me as though I were falling endlessly through space. I could see the stars and great abysses of dark. Then there were huge, empty worlds" Alice gave a wistful smile. "It made me feel just like a goddess looking down on the universe!"

"Mmmm. As a scientist, Miss Denham, it sounds to me more like a definite telepathic contact between worlds. Telepathy takes no cognizance of distance and some kind of contact might be established between yourself and this unknown spot in the microcosm From here on, Miss Denham, take careful note of your dreams. Write down every detail of them the moment you wake up, no matter how trivial those details may seem. Everything helps For the moment I think that is all we can do. Tonight I shall work out a plan of attack to neutralise the trouble. Do all you can to sleep well, and if you don't I'll fix a sedative for you."

It was more than evident to me that Page wanted to hurry both of us off to our rooms. I waited about my own room for nearly an hour after bidding Alice good night; then I returned downstairs to the laboratory. Sure enough Page was there, as I had expected, a long pipe smouldering between his bearded lips, his compact figure bent over the brightly lighted writing desk.

He merely glanced up and nodded to me, then went on working. Every now and again he got to his feet and set to work with electrical apparatus. There were Satanic crack lings of energy, the air becoming tainted with the odour of ozonic discharge. Once or twice he tried putting the diminutive mouse in a glass tube between anode and cathode and subjected it to a bombardment of unknown forces. The mouse appeared unharmed, but evidently the effect was not what Page desired for I saw he was becoming increasingly irritated.

"It's damnable!" he muttered at last, and threw down his pencil on the desk.

I looked at him morosely. "I could think of an even stronger word than that, Earl!"

"I'm talking about this microcosmic world, wherever it is, and the fiendish inhabitants thereon! They must possess scientific knowledge far greater than ours. Why, they're even using a form of electrical energy which I don't understand! And that, from me, is *some* admission!"

It certainly was. Earl Page was one of the foremost electrical wizards of his time even if he did keep his genius to himself.

"Like groping in the dark!" Page banged his fist on the desk.

I looked at him again. "Look, Earl, do you mean by all this that Alice is——"

"I don't mean anything yet for certain." His voice was sharp with frustration. "I've tried to neutralise the mouse and you can see for yourself what's happened. The poor little devil still goes on shrinking! Look at it!"

I looked. Then I said mechanically, "There must *be* a way somehow! You'll find it, Earl. I'm sure you will!"

“You mean you *hope* I will! So far I have had nothing but failure to offer and upstairs there is that poor girl relying on my addled brains to save her from——” Page checked himself. “We don’t know what from. That’s probably the worst part of the whole business.”

“Suppose,” I said deliberately, forcing myself to speak words which were utterly deadening to me, “no cure can be found and Alice just . . . fades away? How long will the process take?”

“No idea. If she reacts as the mouse has there is no predictable speed to the shrinkage. Sometimes it is slow, sometimes fast—but it’s always *there!* It never stops.”

There was a long silence between us. Page lighted his pipe and drew at it savagely, his brows down, his face a pool of darkness under the diagonal rays of the desk-lamp. I turned the whole horrific business over in my mind and finally arrived at what seemed to me a logical inference.

“You say it is some form of electrical energy which is causing the orbits of the electrons forming Alice’s body to shrink? Well, can’t you find the opposite wavelength—or whatever it is—and make them expand?”

“That’s what I *have* been trying to do, but it’s like trying to work out a sum without knowing the basic principle of mathematics. I keep *telling* you, man, this electrical energy is not of the same type as the energy we’re familiar with.”

“I can’t understand that at all, Earl. Surely electrical energy is the same throughout the universe? Positive and negative and——”

He interrupted me with a dry chuckle. “We once thought the electron radiated energy, and that this would make it describe a continually decreasing orbit until it would spiral down into the nucleus and cause the whole atom to vanish in a flash of radiation. We *once* thought that, I say, until Niels Bohr came along with his quantum theory and showed that an electron whilst rotating in its orbit does not in fact radiate any energy whatever! It only radiates energy when jumping from one orbit to another, and the energy thus radiated is a quantum So you see, if one supposed form of radiant energy can be supplanted so easily by another, why cannot electricity as such be in far more forms than the one *we* know? Come to think of it, electrical energy in a microcosmic universe probably *would* be very different from ours. Different laws. Different balance The whole thing’s plain hell, Rod!”

From here on he took so little notice of me, seemed indeed rather distracted by my presence, I took myself off to my room again. But as I passed along the dim corridor past Alice’s room I paused and listened. I could hear her talking—or rather mumbling—at intervals, obviously as she slept. I pressed closer to the door and tried to catch the words.

“. . . shall be found and taken away . . . So vast and barren and alone The machines! The robots! The cities! So far away So far away So small and yet so mighty!”

Then silence for a long while and deep breathing. At length I swung and raced quickly back to the laboratory to tell Page.

“Well, we obviously can’t wake her,” he said briefly. “But we might hear plenty with this” He picked up a wafer-flat microphone attached to a small portable tape recorder. Once we were upstairs again he pushed the microphone under Alice’s bedroom door and then we both kept a silent vigil in the gloom, our faces faintly lighted by the green glow from the recorder’s volume control. When presently the volume indicator began to jump on its green dial we both slipped on subsidiary headphones and listened to Alice’s amplified voice as the recording was made.

“. . . the city covers the planet. The last man is dead but the robots live on Even the robots must die unless they make a being of flesh-and-blood who will grow into an intelligent, reasoning creature and supply them with life to make them anew”

Long pause. The night wind sighed gently against the big window on the corridor. Down in the hall the big clock struck two.

“Looks as though we might be getting some idea of what really is the basis of all this,” Page muttered, dragging at his extinguished pipe. “I don’t like the sound of it, either! Robots needing a flesh-and-blood creature! It sounds——”

“She’s talking again!” I interrupted.

“. . . robots follow out the commands of the flesh-and-blood master who is dead They must have human life—flesh-and-blood The microcosm is empty of life. The macrocosm is empty of life, too, save for the one world of Earth. A mighty world is Earth, huge beyond imagining. One living being from that world and life can be manufactured from it, unit by unit. Unit by unit”

A jumbled mumbling, and then: “Once I am small enough they will take me in an intra-electronic ship, bear me across the gulf to their own strange world. By then I shall be little more than an electrical charge, but the flesh-and-blood basis will still remain”

The words drifted off. Page waited for what seemed an interminable time; then he silently withdrew the microphone and switched off the instrument. With a silent movement of his head he indicated that I should follow him to the laboratory where we could talk in our normal voices.

“Looks to me as though we’re really up against it!” he said bitterly. “Those vague statements were obviously begotten of a telepathic contact with the microcosm, such as I theorised at first.”

“Evidently,” I admitted worriedly.

“Seems clear enough what is wrong,” Page continued, after a moment. “A race of robots—or at least they evidently seem that way to poor Alice’s distracted mind—on a microcosmic world cannot continue indefinitely without a reasoning flesh-and-blood creature—or creatures—to guide them. Following out the orders of the last flesh-and-blood master they have got to find more living matter from which to manufacture living beings to guide them. There is apparently no life anywhere except on this Earth of ours—hence the creation of the Sunstone; hence the disappearance of the previous owners thereof; hence the remorseless shrinkage of Alice Denham.”

“What happened to the previous owners of the Sunstone, do you suppose?” I asked. “Did these microcosmic scientists get them? If so, why aren’t they satisfied? Why keep on trying to get more flesh-and-blood?”

“We don’t know the circumstances as regards the others,” Page sighed. “Maybe they were not suitable, or were lost in sub-atomic space. Whatever those reasons, our concern is for Miss Denham. She mentioned ‘units’. That could mean . . . vivisection!”

I was too horrified to make any comment to this. I could only stare at Page’s troubled face. Then after a moment or two my gaze wandered beyond him to the Sunstone. It still lay on the bench not far from the greatly shrunken white mouse. A thought struck me, though I had no idea whether it was logical or not.

“According to your theory, Earl, once the gem has been in contact with the flesh for over twelve hours it produces an electrical effect which is progressive, whether the stone continues in contact or not?”

“That’s right—and it’s obvious my theory is correct.”

“Are you *sure*, though? Is it not perhaps possible that the stone radiates or transmits its queer energy over an enormous distance and thereby sort of keeps replenishing the mysterious energy which it has imparted to the ‘subject’?”

“Most improbable, I’d say. Why, what have you in mind?”

“I was thinking that we might isolate the gem completely, surround it with a lead wall or something, to stop any radiation getting through. Would that work?”

“It might. Matter of fact I have a lead container which was used recently for radium needles. It might suit our purpose.”

“Try it!” I urged. “Nothing is too fantastic at a time like this. We can soon see if it has any effect on the mouse.”

So we went to work—or rather Page did. Handling that terrible jewel was a task I preferred to leave to him alone, so I stood watching as with his insulated forceps he transferred the stone to the interior of the lead container and then clamped down the lid.

“By all normal laws this *should* block all radiation,” he said, thinking. “The trouble is that I still don’t know what kind of a radiation it is—even if it is a radiation at all! I believe it’s a form of electrical energy——”

“Makes no difference,” I interrupted. “That container will still block it, won’t it?”

“Definitely!”

So we started to watch the mouse as it moved with mournful slowness about its cage. There was none of the bright-eyed scampering usually attached to such a rodent. Just listless movement and the obvious government of fear. Presently, since there was nothing we could do for a while, we went into the house proper and had some refreshment. It succeeded in partly chasing away our tiredness; then we returned into the laboratory and studied the mouse intently. Quietly, Page picked up the nearby ruler, lifted the mouse from its cage and laid it alongside the inches scale.

His face grim he dropped the rodent back in the cage and closed the lid.

“Still shrinking,” he said.

Those words were to me an actual physical shock: I had been so sure my theory was the right one. Yet, just as quickly a new thought came, and I wondered why I had not grasped it before.

“Earl! How’s this for another idea? The world from which this infernal energy, or whatever it is, is emanating may actually be within the stone itself!”

He gave a slight start. “Why, yes,” he murmured softly. “I never thought of that. More than probable, in fact, which would explain how it is always kept in focus. Not only that world but its universe, and maybe a myriad other universes besides.”

“Destroy the stone utterly by electricity and we destroy that electronic world,” I said solemnly. “Stockbroker I may be, but I *can* grasp that much!”

He hesitated no more. Quickly taking the gem from the container—once again with insulated forceps—he put it in the matrix of the atomic equipment. It seemed mighty force to use upon so small an object—the smashing of the nut with the sledgehammer indeed!—but the purpose merited it. Switches closed. For nearly ten minutes energy built up—then Page released it by throwing the switches. The Sunstone vanished in unholy fire and quiverings of electrical energy, and to both of us it was a sombre thought that maybe thousands—millions—of universes in the microcosm had been destroyed in that instant.

“Now!” Page breathed, moving back to the rodent. “Let us see . . . I still think the energy once absorbed is irreversible and continuous. But we can hope . . .”

In an hour we knew the answer. The mouse was four inches less in size . . .!

The morning showed that Alice was visibly smaller. A Breakfast was an almost silent affair, neither Page nor I saying what we had been doing in the night. He still seemed to think there was something he could try.

What I found particularly hard to endure was the dumb look of terror in Alice’s eyes. I tried to reiterate assurances—but as the hours flew by and Page laboured to master a science centuries ahead of him, my hopes began to sink into my boots. Evidently the energy *was* progressive, for it was still operating even though we had probably destroyed the original creators of it. This again was an awful thought. Alice had muttered something in her sleep about being picked up in an interatomic ship. That might now never be. Where in the devil’s name *would* she go if we could not save her? If we could not! Egoist! The whole thing relied, as before, on Page.

Alice could see that we were fighting the impossible—and Page left no channel unexplored. He called in other scientists, and once they realised the astounding implications they threw all their combined genius into an effort to overcome the devilish power which was reducing the silent Alice before their fascinated eyes.

Hour by hour now Alice was changing incredibly. She went to her room and I was the only one whom she would permit to see her. I gave her the news of the grim battle we were fighting, and *still* I tried to assure her that we would yet win the battle. Her only response was to smile faintly. She lay there in the bed, overcome now by a tremendous lethargy which all the drugs sent up by Page failed to break. Yes, she lay there, like a waxen doll, and when I looked down on her I openly cursed that heinous stone we had seen in the jeweller’s window.

I could not remember meals, or periods of rest, or anything. I was flying up and downstairs all the time. Until at length it was early evening and I realised that all the feverish activity of the day was over. The scientists had departed and Page sat in the laboratory, his dead pipe forgotten between his teeth.

Presently he looked up at me. “It’s no good, Rod! We’ve got to tell her—even if she doesn’t know already. We’re sunk! The latest reports from the other workers show that there is no known way of combating this mysterious electrical force which, once infused into a living organism, causes the electronic orbits to shrink, and shrink and *shrink!*”

I stirred slowly as I stood before his desk. “Somehow I had thought, even to the last, that you’d pull something out of the hat.”

“I’m not a magician, Rod.” He gave my arm a brief grip. “Sometimes there drifts into the orbit of science a power, an unknown factor, which is completely beyond analysis. This is one of those times.” He got to his feet and put a hand to his forehead. “God, but I’m weary . . .! We’d better go and break the news as gently as we can.”

We went solemnly from the laboratory, through the hall, and up the stairs. When we had reached the corridor I caught hold of Page’s arm.

“Earl—a moment. We can’t tell Alice a terrible thing like this without giving her a way out. You’ve got dozens of potent, painless drugs down in that lab. of yours. Can’t you use one so that she . . .”

He hesitated. “That would be euthanasia,” he said.

“I don’t care!” I told him brutally. “Every court in the land would uphold a mercy killing in a case like this! I insist on it, Earl. I’ll take the responsibility!”

He looked at me steadily, then without another word he went back down the corridor. Quietly I entered Alice’s room and took a few steps forward, leaving the door open.

I stopped. There was a deadly quietness in the evening light. Outside the window the newly budding beech tree swayed in the spring breeze I absorbed the merciless, overwhelming fact that the bed was empty! There were the tangled clothes, the sewn-in nightdress which Alice had contrived to fit her diminishing proportions And that was all.

At the sound of swift footsteps I turned and looked fixedly towards the doorway as Page came in, a phial in his hand. He looked at me, at the bed, and back to me.

“We shan’t need that now,” I said in a low voice.

Outside the window the beech tree swayed and was straight again

[The end of *Alice, Where Art Thou?* by John Russell Fearn (as Volsted Gridban)]