

SCIENCE FICTION

THE NEW LIFE
by
JOHN COLERIDGE
MEN WITHOUT
A WORLD
by
DENNIS CLIVE

MARCH
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Also:
BOB OLSEN
CARL JACOBI
EPHRIAM
WINIKI



MAR.

SCIENCE FICTION

THE NEW LIFE
by JOHN COLERIDGE

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MEN WITHOUT A WORLD

By

John Russell Fearn

Writing under the pseudonym Dom Passante.

Note the cover uses a different pseudonym of Dennis Clive.

First published *Science Fiction*, March 1940.

Two men and a girl, lost in the depths of the Peruvian jungle in their hunt for a great scientist, come upon a weird valley where reflected sunlight opens a secret door into the side of a cliff, revealing a hideous plot of cosmic destruction!



Fay, come back! Don't go in!

was—a research scientist.

The third member of the trio pushed a stray golden curl further up under her topee, sat down languidly on a rock and fanned herself. Dick had said that the Peruvian wastes was no place for a girl; now she was commencing to believe it. In the few moments of respite, her mind went swiftly back over the period since they had left New York. . . .

First, her father, Professor Grant Denham, the famous archaeologist, had sent a desperate radio call from these very wastes, had given the exact longitude and latitude, had sworn he had discovered something of enormous interest, but was lost and needed help.

The dash from New York had followed. All had gone well at first, then the guides had deserted, stealing most of the equipment, leaving the three stranded with only a few

The blazing South American sun had passed the meridian as the little party mounted to the top of the twining mountain road through the Peruvian Sierras. What kit they had was on their backs. There were no mules, no guides; the three of them were quite alone.

Fletcher Grey, lean-faced and of uncertain age, pushed his Panama hat further over his eyes and blew out his cheeks expressively. His bare mahogany arm pointed to the valley that now confronted them.

“Maybe that’s it?” he suggested hopefully.

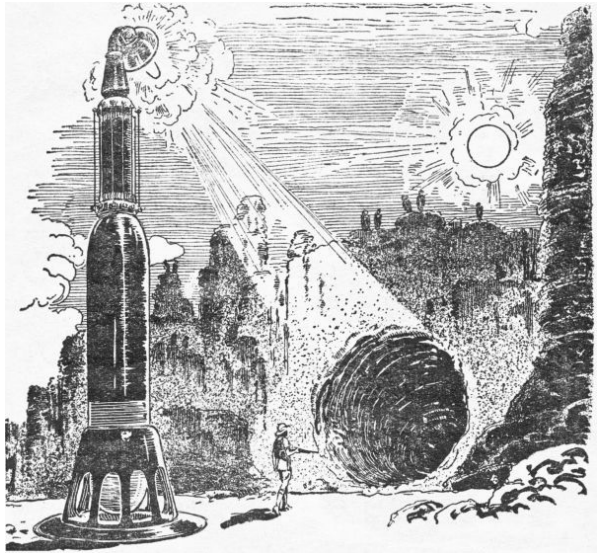
“If not, it darn well oughta be!” Dick Whittle had his field glasses to his eyes as he spoke, studied the view with that certain impartial calm that stamped him for what he

instruments and a little food. She shuddered at remembrance. . . . Struggle and flood; jungles and sweat. Onward, day after day—

“I believe it *is* it!” Dick said suddenly, handing over the glasses to Fletcher—and while he stared through them, Dick pulled a crumpled paper from his pocket and studied it earnestly.

Fay Denham recognized it as the verbatim message that had come over the radio from her father—that had brought her fiancé and his friend from their normal occupation in New York’s Research Laboratories, to this forsaken spot in the jungles.

Gazing over Dick’s arm, she read:



“. . . valley situated approximately immediately below western limb of Peruvian Sierras. Latitude and longitude details will follow in separate report. In the center of the valley is an upright column of curious metal, unlike anything we know—and at its summit reposes a hemisphere of similar metal, its inner side convex—very like the ornaments put on Christmas trees for children.

“Opposite to this column, perhaps a mile away, is a massive cliff escarpment of red stone, upon which are written the most astounding hieroglyphics, so far quite undecipherable. I believe . . .”

Dick lowered the paper, his grey eyes bright and keen.

“We’ve found it!” he breathed. “Our stragglings haven’t been in vain. This *is* the place. Take a look, Fay . . .”

He helped the girl up onto the rock and she stared out under shaded hand over the valley below. It was not particularly vast, but it was barren and hot in the sunshine, its further side smothered in redundant verdure. In the center of the valley floor she could make out one solitary post and gleaming ball—then to the right she beheld a towering red rock face, the face of the hillside they were now standing on. But from this position, the strange hieroglyphics referred to were invisible because of the angle.

“So that’s where dad called from,” the girl whispered. “I can hardly believe it. . . . Wonder where he is now?”

“That’s what we’ve come to find out,” Dick answered gravely. He stilled the utterance to blurt out that he fully believed old man Denham to be dead. . . .

“Yeah; we made it,” Fletcher said laconically, pushing the glasses behind him. “Let’s go!” And he started off down the slope, slipping and sliding through the loose stones.

An hour's rough and tumble descent brought them to the valley floor, immediately beneath the columned ball. It reposed a full hundred feet above their heads, completely uncorroded—even as the pillar itself—by weather conditions.

Dick studied it thoughtfully, his scientific mind devising possible explanations. Finally he climbed the post slowly with the aid of a piece of rope, came down again with a baffled frown.

"Damned if I know," he growled. "The metal's unlike anything I've come across before—enormously tough and resistant to this nitric acid phial of mine. May have been here a year or a thousand years; impossible to say."

He swung around and gazed at the towering red rock face a mile distant across the scrubby, rocky stretch.

"Some etchings!" he whistled at length.

"But what do they mean?" Fletcher demanded, frowning. "We didn't come all this way to look at fancy writing which nobody can figure out. We came to find Professor Denham—"

"They look like Egyptian to me," Fay broke in quickly.

Silence fell upon them, the silence of wonderment as to how hundreds of strange letters had been blasted into virgin rock in order to present some kind of unmistakable message. Only a blind man could have missed them, considering their size.

"Not Egyptian, Mosaic, early Arabian—not even shorthand," growled Fletcher, lighting his pipe. "Best thing we can do is to make a camp here and then try and figure out how to find some clue that will lead us to Denham. . . ."

Dick could not help himself saying, "You really believe we *shall* find him?"

"Why not?"

Dick looked around expressively. Mutely Fletcher and the girl took in the barrenness and the silence.

"Not even the traces of a campfire," Dick muttered. "I don't want to say it, because of you, Fay—but I think we're too late. Something happened to your dad, even as he hinted in that radio message. Remember, he never communicated again. . . ."

"You're a nice cheery sort of devil," Fletcher growled. "If we don't find him, figure out the jam we're in. No way back. We'd never find the way back to our airplane base; we only got here by luck. Without radio, we're sunk. . . ." He broke off as he saw Fay's lower lip quivering in dismay. With rough sentiment, he flung his arm round her shoulders. "Aw, cheer up, kid—maybe I'm nuts anyway. Maybe we all are," he finished significantly, cocking his eye on the cliff writing.

Dick shrugged his shoulders. "Well, since we're going to make camp, we'd better get started. . . ."

Fletcher glanced toward the forest. "Guess there's enough vegetation there to build a skyscraper," he commented. "I'll get some and bring it down to build a shelter with. You fix up a fire."

"I'll collect dry wood!" Fay volunteered, trying hard not to look despairing.

"O. K."

CHAPTER II

THE SECRET PASSAGE

Fletcher turned aside and headed away toward the nearby jungle. The girl wandered slowly in the direction of the rock face, picking up pieces of dry wood as she went. Dick watched her for a time, smiling a little at the smallness of her slim, dainty figure against the vastness all around. Then he turned to prepare the details of the camp.

He was surprised to find how rapidly the time passed. It seemed only minutes before Fletcher came back with his first huge armful of vegetation. He dropped the stuff down, glanced around.

“Where’s Fay gotten to?”

“Collecting wood, and—” Dick frowned suddenly, a puzzled light in his eyes as he glanced up. “But hell, she can’t be doing it all this time!”

He jumped up. Together they stared over the shimmering heat haze toward the cliff face whither the girl had wandered. She was nowhere to be seen.

“You’re a darn fool to let her wander off like that!” Fletcher snapped. “No telling what’s around here. If that’s the way you treat the kid before she marries you—poor fish—how are you going to— Gosh, that’s interesting!” he wound up keenly.

“Huh? What is?” Dick stared at him.

“That reflection of this mounted ball on the cliff face. Look!”

In a moment Dick saw what was meant. Like the circular reflection from a mirror, the sunlight striking the columned convex ball had produced a circle of light on the cliff face, was slowly moving along its lower reaches.

“Interesting, yes; but I’ve got to look for Fay,” Dick said anxiously. “Better give me a hand.”

They strode a few yards, then Fletcher stopped and pointed. His big lean face was grinning with relief. “There she is—like a cocksparrow studying the Colossus of Rhodes!”

“Wrong gender,” growled Dick mechanically, too relieved to further the argument. He grinned too; Fletcher’s description was remarkably apt. The girl stood out clearly by reason of her white blouse, was standing with feet apart and hands on hips staring up at the enormous escarpment. She was at least a mile away, a mere speck. . . . Evidently the cliff had attracted her; time had meant nothing.

“Hey there, Fay—come back here!” Dick roared, cupping his hands to his mouth.

She turned at that and waved her arm in response. They saw her action clearly—and they also saw something else. At least the keen-eyed Fletcher did. His powerful hand tightened on Dick’s arm.

“Say, look again at that light reflection. It’s only a yard from her. She can’t see it where she is. Suppose it isn’t just light, but something else? If she gets in the way of it—”

“It’s sunshine, you nut,” Dick scoffed. “What do you expect it to be? A death ray?”

“I dunno. Nothing here would surprise me.”

“I’m all for joining Fay. Come on. . . .”

Fletcher hesitated, he knew not why; then with a shrug, he accommodated his long legs to Dick’s shorter steps and they strode together across the rocky plain. Fay waved several times,

then resumed her study of the rock face, entirely unaware of the reflected circle of sunshine creeping ever nearer to her.

Both men were pretty well forced to watch the ground as they moved to avoid stumbling, therefore it came to both of them as a distinct shock when they heard a sudden wild scream from the girl. Her words floated clearly on the still, hot air.

“*Look at the cliff!*”

“Holy cats!” whispered Fletcher, transfixed with amazement.

He had reason to be, too. A portion of the cliff wall, directly in front of the girl, had opened up half its length, leaving an aperture roughly eight feet wide by twenty high. Fay was silhouetted now as a white speck against an oblong of dark.

Dick leapt suddenly into life, shouted at the top of his voice.

“Don’t go in! Fay, come back! *Don’t go in!*”

“Dammit, man, the girl’s only human . . .” Fletcher grunted.

They both stood watching as, driven by curiosity, the girl went forward into the gap and disappeared from view.

“Well?” Dick glared round. “What are we waiting for? We’ve got to grab her back. . . .”

They started forward, stumbling and gasping with their efforts as they raced over stones and rubble. . . . Then when they were only a few feet away from the great yawning entrance, it closed on them, completely and with solid finality.

Dick came to a dead stop, chest heaving mightily, perspiration pouring down his face. He was too bewildered for the moment to speak. When he did find his voice, his remark was not illuminating.

“It’s closed! Closed!”

“No fooling!” Fletcher eyed the mass thoughtfully. Despite his habitual levity, his analytical mind was busy.

Dick swung around, charged for the rock face and examined it with a feverish desperation. Faintly he could detect the almost invisible line where the movable piece linked into the main face. He thumped on it until his fists were sore, bellowed at the top of his voice—but nothing happened and no sound reached him.

“She must have found a concealed spring and pressed it,” he gulped at last, mopping his face.

Fletcher laughed shortly. “What do you think this is, a safe deposit box or something? I’ve been looking around while you’ve been yammering. . . . That was responsible!” He nodded his atrocious Panama hat toward the circle of light moving along the cliff.

“You—you mean—?” Dick calmed suddenly. “You mean that circle of light operated a spring somewhere?”

“Sure . . .” Fletcher motioned Dick to his side. Together they studied the rock face with infinite care, finally turned around and gazed back at the columned globe. The solar reflection had now left the cliff face.

“This rock here,” Fletcher said, “isn’t like ordinary rock. Notice? It’s been treated by some scientific process that, in one particular spot where the sun reflection strikes, has become crystallized. See . . .”

Dick studied the dully glinting portion and nodded.

“Guess you’re right, but who on earth would rig up such an idea?—such a complicated style of lock?”

“Likewise, who spent their time writing love letters on the cliff face?” Fletcher demanded. “As to the lock, there must be a scientific principle involved. . . . Listen to this one. If you’re half the scientist you make out, you’ll follow me. . . . Had we precision instruments delicately enough attuned, we would be able to see this cliff face—or any object for that matter—recoil very slightly under the pressure of strong light. To the eye there is no evidence of this fact—and *fact* it is.

“Suppose, though, that this crystallized substance, together with that globe’s convex interior, have between them some way of utilizing the ultimate force of light?—solar light, that is. The impact might conceivably be strong enough to shift some hidden rock balance which at present we can’t find. . . . Anyway, it’s an idea, and if I’m anywhere near right, we’re up against a science beyond all ordinary standards. We’ve nothing in our science to touch ideas like that!”

He broke off, made an irritated gesture. “But here am I dopping out theories, when our main concern is Fay.”

“Blast those guides!” breathed Dick vehemently. “But for them frisking half our equipment, we’d have heavy explosive with us, could make a way through.”

“Through *this*?” Fletcher eyed him sadly.

“Well—we might do something, anyway. Revolvers are no good, I suppose . . .? No, of course not. Anyway, Fay will be in deadly danger. If not that, she’ll be scared to death.”

He turned back to the thin line in the rock and bellowed the girl’s name again. Nothing happened. Bitter faced, he turned.

“Sound doesn’t penetrate,” he groaned.

“Suppose we try common-sense,” Fletcher suggested in an acrid voice. “That solar reflection worked at roughly ten minutes after three. You were howling at the time so I didn’t tell you.” He regarded his watch. “It will happen tomorrow at approximately the same time—or should do. If it does, we go in. If not . . .”

He stopped, set faced.

“And in the meantime we have to trust Providence that Fay is safe,” Dick muttered. He sighed, rubbed the back of his neck perplexedly. “It’s going to be hellish waiting all that time, not knowing what’s happening in there. But I guess you’re right,” he admitted resignedly. “We’d better make camp and see if we can think up any solution.”

In silence, they turned to begin the return journey.

CHAPTER III INTO THE CLIFF

As they walked, neither man spoke. Both were busy with their own thoughts. . . .

Then presently Fletcher stopped, bent down and picked up a battered cylinder of white enamel, rusty with exposure. Baffled, he glanced around on the dimly visible remains of a camp fire. In curiosity he turned the cylinder over, started as he beheld the initials "G. D." scored on the enamel with a copying lead.

"Grant Denham!" he gasped. "Well I'm damned!"

Dick almost snatched it from him, tugged off the airtight lid and then extracted several note book leaves from the cylinder's interior. Tensely the pair of them read. . . .

"Possibly, if my radio message was received, somebody will come to this spot where I have my camp and find this. I am leaving it here in this container with that hope. The white paint may catch the eye.

"I have not yet discovered what lies beyond the rock face, but I am told—with some reluctance I might add—that at certain periods of the year the cliff face opens! It may be native talk, but it is worth waiting for. The time will not be here yet for another two months. . . . Somehow, though, I have a deep premonition that those two months mean nothing to me; they might as well be eternity! The guides with me believe, from my instruments I think, that I am bewitched and a danger to their security. I cannot entirely blame them. I have certainly made many strange experiments which have fostered their childish distrust of me.

"I do feel though that they will kill me. The rest of my party is fifty miles away in trackless waste. They refused to accompany me on what they considered a foolhardy errand. Old books have been my only guide to this mysterious valley.

"If anything happens to me, maybe this message will be found. My radio has been smashed; this is my only means of giving a last word—an important last word that I had not the time to transmit before over the radio. Here it is; it will interest any scientist in the party.

"I have been observing for some considerable time the remarkable fact that the sun and planets are becoming appreciably smaller! I have checked this fact with leading astronomers over a period of years. There is no doubt that the circumference of the sun and planets, and moon, have all lessened! Unable to explain the mystery, astronomers have not published facts. I believe—

"I must stop! Danger—! Denham."

The message ended with a hasty stroke of pencil. It was obvious the professor had only had time to push the sheets in the container and then throw it away, his intended explanation never given.

"So they got him . . ." Dick muttered. "Poor old Prof. . . . Must have taken him into the jungle. The remains of the camp are here all right. . . ."

"Wonder what he was driving at?" Fletcher stroked his chin "Sun seems all right to me—plenty hot enough anyway. . . . Do you know anything about it?"

Dick shrugged. "I read an announcement in the paper long ago referring to the puzzling diminution of sun, moon and planets, but I figured it was bunk. Now I begin to wonder. . . . Denham only pondered worthy ideas."

"When we find Fay we'll have to tell her."

"Yeah . . ." Dick sighed, looked around moodily. "It's got me licked," he muttered. "The shrinking sun and planets? The swinging cliff door? The writing on the escarpment? Fay? Oh, heck! Let's make camp and sit down to think. . . ."

Sitting down and thinking did little good. Both men were too morose to talk much. They ate a silent meal, lay before their camp fire, brooding. In turns they snatched brief sleep, but nothing untoward disturbed the calm moon-ridden beauty of the tropical night.

At the first flush of dawn, Fletcher was up and about, climbed up the pillar of the polished globe and made a far closer inspection than Dick had done. The interior, the convex portion, of the globe was certainly of the same crystallized nature as that one portion of the cliff wall.

"I've a few amendments to make to my theory of yesterday," Fletcher said, during the morning. "As I figure it out, the special area of the rock face is very thin—where that crystallized portion is. Light is concentrated and reflected from this device onto it at certain periods of the year—according to the angle of the sun, of course. The force of the light-waves is somehow converted by the crystal stuff; maybe its atomic makeup changes light into energy. It then passes through the thin shell of rock to hidden machinery behind. That reacts and the cliff door opens. . . . And, boy, what scientific engineering that must have demanded!" he finished, whistling.

"Probably if we could read that cliff writing, we'd have the solution right now," Dick muttered.

"Mebbe. . . ." Fletcher pondered over that, then turned aside.

He said little after that, or during lunch. Both of them were waiting with intense anxiety for three o'clock. An hour before that time they were at the cliff face, packs on their backs, revolvers fully loaded, torches ready. . . .

In somber silence they watched the circle of light begin its journey of yesterday along the cliff wall. Anxiously they mentally checked off the minutes, stood tensely observing the crack in the cliff face.

At last the light circle touched the crystallized portion— There was a sudden gust of cool air amidst the heat. To the accompaniment of a low creaking, the crack began to widen. Awestruck, both men stood staring up at the parting walls, marveling at the engineering that had devised such a system in virgin rock.

"O. K.—inside!" Fletcher snapped suddenly, and strode forward.

In a moment, they were together in a tomblike darkness. Hardly had they taken a dozen paces before the rock door closed behind them with complete silence, leaving not the slightest evidence of the sunshine beyond.

"Charming!" came Fletcher's laconic voice from the blackness; then his torch blazed on and revealed his keenly interested face under the Panama hat.

Dick's torch switched on a second later. In silence, they stared around. They were inside a small, artificially made cavern some twelve feet high, with squarely shorn walls. Against the outer wall was a mechanism of transparent metal—so tough it did not even scratch as Dick speculatively tapped it with his revolver butt.

Beside him, Fletcher peered at the machinery. It was plainly manufactured from a substance obviously made to stand the test of enormous lengths of time. There were governors, drums of wound wire, small electrodes, tubes. . . . And back of it all a lever arm on a massive joint which receded into the rock, making its reappearance over the visible edge of the rock door.

“I was right this far, anyway,” he commented. “This thing, so far as I understand it, is an electrical device which reacts when the force of light waves strike the crystal portion of the rock in front of it—outside, that is—like a photographic lens gathers images to a focus and then imprints them on the plate back of the camera. This machinery then operates, moves the crank, and the sesame act comes into being. A few moments, then this automatic plunder drops and the door shuts. All done by balance. . . . Wouldn’t Chu Chin Chow have a grand time here?”

“I like your reasoning—but I like this better,” Dick said quickly. He was waving his torch on the floor. It was thickly dusty, but it carried the marks of a woman’s gum boots.

“So Fay wasn’t too scared to carry on?” Fletcher cried. “Good for Fay! She had her torch, of course. . . .” His eyes followed the prints to a square doorway. Immediately he led the way toward it.

CHAPTER IV

FAY'S LEVITATION

It gave entrance to a cavern of far greater proportions—once again man-made. Somehow air was admitted, probably through invisible rock crevices giving outlet to the cliff face. The place smelt musty and incredibly old.

Dick flashed his torch around the walls, frowned over the sight the beam threw back—that of dully gleaming cases, apparently copper, six feet high and two broad, standing upright in specially contrived niches some twelve feet above the floor level. There were six cases in all, three on each side of the cavern.

“Hell’s bells!” he ejaculated. “What do you know—”

“Look!” cried Fletcher hoarsely. “For Pete’s sake—*look!*”

Dick stared astounded as their twin beams converged on the amazing sight of Fay Denham, suspended horizontally and face upward, about twelve feet from the floor! She was directly between the three cases on opposite walls. Her arms were folded on her breast, her body was as straight as though she lay on a board. Her eyes were closed, her face deathly white.

But support there was none! No wires, no controls, no anything. She just floated there like the motionless product of an illusionist’s trick!

“Say, would that knock ’em cold on the halls?” Fletcher whispered, waving his hands below her.

“But—but how’d she get that way?” Dick babbled. “What’s holding her up—?”

“She’s alive, anyway—at least I think so.” Fletcher walked below and around her, studying her keenly. Then he swung around. “Gimme a hand up!” he ordered.

Unsteadily, he climbed onto Dick’s broad shoulders, balanced himself with difficulty and examined the girl at close quarters. Her heart was beating steadily; she was breathing evenly. The only queer thing about her was that wherever he touched her he felt his body thrill and tingle.

“Electricity; force of some sort,” he exclaimed, jumping down again. “The only explanation is that she’s suspended magnetically. Yeah, that’s it!” he went on eagerly. “She’s between those three cases on each side of the cavern. . . . They’re our next line of search. Come on!”

They turned and resumed their equilibristic act, Fletcher studying the three cases on the left hand wall by his torchlight. He muttered remarks at intervals.

“They’re not solid metal. . . . Believe it or not, they’re made of tightly packed wire; millions of feet of it, I’d say, thin as a hair and— Ouch! They’ve got electricity running through them. Or *is* it electricity? Damned if I know. . . .”

“Wire?” Dick wheezed, sustaining all the weight. “Can’t you even see between the windings?”

“Not a chance! So tightly packed they form a solid wall. . . .”

Fletcher jumped down and they stood gazing together at the floating, motionless girl.

“Well?” Dick asked at last, perplexedly. “What do we do now?”

“Don’t ask me! We’re up against scientific forces here—scientific forces too mighty for us to understand. Fay’s quite unhurt; that’s one good thing. She’ll recover sooner or later, then maybe we’ll learn the truth. . . . Perhaps there is life inside those mummy cases?”

“If there is, why doesn’t it emerge?”

Fletcher shrugged, absently flashed his torch around the great cavern. Then he gave a start as he beheld a long, squarely shorn doorway on the far wall. With mute accord, he and Dick started toward it, stood on its threshold and waved their torch beams into the emptiness beyond. The light reflected back to them from carefully stacked machinery, most of it thickly coated with some kind of grease evidently impervious to atmospheric effects.

“Lord!” was all Dick could whisper, as he and Fletcher tramped down the silent, dusty aisles and stared around them. “Good Lord, it’s utterly unbelievable! Ages old, untouched—Ready and waiting. Fletch, what do you make of it?”

Fletcher pushed up his hat and mopped his frowning brow.

“It seems absurd,” he said, “but from what I’ve seen of theoretical space-ships, I’d say that most of this stuff here belongs *to* a space-ship! It is in truth a space-ship dismantled; all its outer plates over there”—he nodded toward a ceiling high stack of curved metal plates—“and here the machinery that comprised the innards. Those pipes over there might easily pass for rocket tubes. . . . There’s a lot of other machinery too that isn’t applicable to a space-machine. Those massive projectors, for example. Heat ray machines, maybe. Perhaps used to bore out these very caverns. . . .”

He stopped and shrugged. “Looks like Prof. Denham had the right idea in coming around here. We *have* found something!”

“I just wonder if—” Dick began; then he broke off and spun around at a sudden hoarse cry from the adjoining cavern—a woman’s cry, and of pain too!

“Fay!” Fletcher exclaimed, then they both tore back into the main cavern, torch beams playing wildly. They came across no scene of Fay struggling mightily against aggressive captors. No; she was lying on the floor, gradually sitting up and rubbing her anatomy tenderly. Her blue eyes blinked surprisedly in the light.

Fletcher started to grin. He could not help it. Chuckling, he hauled the girl to her feet and eyed her amusedly.

“So—so you got in too?” she panted at last. “What’s been happening around here? How’d I come to be on the floor like that? Must have fallen, I guess. . . .” She rubbed herself tenderly.

The two men glanced at each other, then Dick quietly went into explanations. The girl listened with widening eyes.

“You mean that when I thought I fainted in here I really didn’t faint? That I was somehow overpowered and made to float like an airship? Bunk!” She broke off and frowned. “Maybe you’re right, though. It seems an awful long time ago since I ate and drank. . . . Hmm, funny!”

Fletcher unstrapped his haversack and water bottle, handed them over. As she refreshed herself, Dick went on to outline the fate of her father. She took it steadily. . . .

“I half expected it,” she muttered. “I—I guess crying won’t bring him back. . . .”

“Good girl,” Dick murmured. “We need all the nerve we’ve got at present—”

“Maybe I’m wrong,” Fletcher broke in, his head cocked on one side, “but I think I hear something. . . .”

A moment later they all heard it—a slow, crackling crepitation like a chicken breaking through its egg.

“Uh-uh! Something coming!” Fay whispered. Her eyes went quickly around the cavern in the reflected torchlight. Then with a shout she clutched Dick’s arm. “Look! That third case is opening!”

“Keep your torches on it,” Fletcher said, tight-lipped.

They waited breathlessly, yet somehow without fear. The girl, the men remembered, had not been harmed—only borrowed. . . .

CHAPTER V

REVIVAL

The third case on the left wall broke slowly, its wires snapping like coal underfoot. Then suddenly the front fell entirely away. The torchlight glared onto a being that was anything but fantastic—a man, of apparently enormous age, garbed in white.

His white beard matched his raiment; his long white hair flowed down the sides of his face. And what a face it was! Even in its present repose, it mirrored masterful strength, sublime intelligence—square chin, firm but sensitive mouth, curved nose, and a great, soundly balanced forehead.

“Who is he? A Druid?” Fay whispered.

“No more than I am,” Fletcher retorted brusquely. “He—”

He broke off as the man’s eyes suddenly opened. They were so utterly dark that pupil and iris intermingled, producing two irresistible black orbs staring from the white face. Those eyes radiated intelligence, mental power that had almost hypnotic—but by no means hostile—intensity.

“Better give him a hand down from that case,” Dick said suddenly. “He’s not so young. . . .”

“One is only as old as one believes,” came the grave response from the wall, in a voice that was deeply rich and mellow. . . .

The three glanced at each other in bewilderment; then in a few moments, the man had descended from his lofty perch by means of formerly unseen steps in the cavern wall. He came forward slowly, his grave eyes fixed on the trio.

“In a moment or two my five companions will have also awakened from their sleep,” he stated quietly. “My name, by the way, is *Ralgo*. . . . My home?” He smiled a little in his beard. “It does not matter. For the moment it is Earth. . . .”

Fletcher was about to speak, but he was waved into muteness.

“Yes, I know you are full of questions—and rightly, too. They will be answered. Your language? A mere nothing when you reflect that language is merely an oral method of expressing thought. I express thoughts too; the language is merely the materialistic go-between, easily mastered from a brief study of your minds. . . . So, I talk your language. . . . Our purpose here? That is a long story, not so easily told. Of more importance at the moment is our gratitude to you for restoring us—particularly you, young lady. . . .”

His mystical eyes turned to the startled girl, and she shrank a little closer to Dick’s protecting arm.

“Look here, what the devil is all this about?” Fletcher demanded, unable to contain himself any longer. “How do you figure out that Fay restored you? You mean that levitation act?”

“We’ll begin at the beginning,” *Ralgo* said impassively. “How we come to be here is not, at the moment, relevant. What *is* relevant is the fact that my comrades and I found it necessary to retire into a long sleep lasting thousands of years. . . . Yes, thousands! Outside this place you may have seen a columned ball? Maybe you know it collects and concentrates the force waves back of light?”

"I figured that," said Fletcher slowly.

"But what about the writing on the cliff face?" Dick demanded.

"That was written in our own language and gave the periods of the year at which our door would open," Ralgo answered. "We had no means of knowing, at the time of commencing our sleep, what language was prevalent in this land, so of course we used our own. When we first arrived here there was little intelligent life around us; and for the consummation of our plans we needed generations to elapse. We could only sleep through those generations, and arrange a system by which our prison opened at certain times of the day in certain periods of the year. One day, we hoped, a living being would enter. One did . . . This woman you call Fay."

"Then what happened?" Fletcher chewed his pipe industriously.

"Our cases were composed of wires possessing a distinct magnetic quality with an almost interminable duration—a magnetism which is to flesh and blood what your magnetisms are to steel. The instant the girl set foot between the opposite poles of the magnetism she was raised and held suspended . . ."

Ralgo paused, pondered as though choosing his words. Then suddenly he asked, "When you wish to conduct electricity from your power houses to, say, your electric bulbs, what means do you utilize?"

"Wires—naturally," Dick answered promptly.

"Exactly; you have to have a medium. Did it ever occur to you that life force might be just like electricity? Life current is perhaps a better term. Think for a moment of the teeming millions on this planet. What do you imagine is their basic *life*?—atoms, naturally, which makes up their beings, and atoms are electrical. Every body must draw life current from other living bodies; the experiments of the scientist Mendel, in relation to living cells, is sufficient witness to that. An organism, however complicated, cannot live unto itself . . . You may perceive that we six, shut up alone here, were unable to return to life until we established contact with the swarming sources of life in the world around us. For that we had to have a medium, just as electricity needs a wire. Fay here became that wire."

"Huh?" Fay ejaculated.

"It's quite simple," Ralgo insisted. "You, Fay—every living unit—is invisibly connected by life magnetism with other life like your own on the planet, no matter if thousands of miles separate you from it, as is so at present . . . So as she hung there in an unconscious state, she was unwittingly conducting to our cases a life current through her body from the life around her. The atomic makeup of the cases transformed the energy thus received, mechanisms inside operated and . . . We awoke. The moment that happened the magnetism ceased. Fay, I suppose, fell to the floor . . ."

"I'll say!" she growled.

"And until she came nobody has ever been in here?" Dick questioned.

"No." Ralgo turned and glanced upwards as the other three cases revealed signs of collapse. One by one, as the party watched, the remaining unknowns leapt down to the floor—all of them very like Ralgo himself, though it was plain he was leader.

One of them presently absented himself in the machine cavern beyond, and a moment or two later the gloom was transformed by blazing bars of light set high in the roof.

"Cold light!" whistled Fletcher. "Boy, would that fetch some cash!"

"No doubt you'll require food," Ralgo said, turning. "Come this way . . ."

And he led the way into the machine cavern . . .

Now that the place was thoroughly illuminated, the two men at least could gather the tremendous knowledge that was implied by those gleaming engines, several of them being tended by the remaining five men. To the girl, seeing the place for the first time, the sight was very close to wonderland. She gazed around in wrapt awe, continued to do so long after Ralgo had motioned to a table and provided food and drink from massive synthesis machinery.

“Say, what do you make of these old boys?” Fletcher muttered, as they were left to their meal. “Who do you figure they are? From their appearance, they’re earthly; yet from their conversation I judge they are from another world. I’ll swear that stuff there is the remains of a space ship.”

“I’m not so mystified as to their origin as I am to their purpose in sleeping thousands of years and making such elaborate preparations for awakening,” Dick muttered. “Look at them now. What’s that they’re rigging up? A telescope?”

Neither Fay nor Fletcher answered. Then Ralgo came forward and seated himself, regarded the three each in turn.

“I wonder,” he said slowly, “if you—or any of your men of science—have realized that the earth is doomed to destruction?—maybe centuries, but it will come long before its natural time; in fact, not only this world, but all the inner planets in the system. Mars, Venus, Mercury . . .”

“How doomed?” Fletcher asked.

“Have any of you noticed that the planets, sun and moon are apparently becoming smaller?”

Dick started. “Good Lord, yes! I’ve seen references to it, and Fay’s father went further than that. Here—read this.”

He fished out Denham’s notes from his pocket and handed them over. Ralgo read them gravely, returned them.

“Probably he was about to explain the matter just as I shall do now,” he commented. “It has been going on for generations, thousands of years, is part and parcel of a ruthless scheme of power upon which my colleagues and I stumbled long ago before our sleep . . . Truth of the matter is, the sun and planets are not really receding. The real fact is that Earth and planets are getting *smaller*, while the sun remains the same size as ever.”

“What!” exploded Fletcher. “That’s absurd!”

“Why is it?” Ralgo demanded. “You understand Relativity, do you not? If the Earth and everything on it becomes smaller in exact ratio, the only guide to the fact is the apparent shrinkage of distant stellar bodies, and if those bodies—as in the case of the planets—are *also* shrinking, the effect of distance is more than ever evident. Weight is unchanged, because as you will presently see, the mass of the earth has not been materially altered . . . In the end, Earth and the planets will be so compressed to their atomic bases that electron will unite with proton and each world will go out in a flash of cosmic rays.”

“Say, you paint a devilish picture,” Fletcher breathed, staring at the Ancient fixedly. “Where do you fit in, anyway?”

The somber eyes turned to him. “We fit in because we know all about it, and have for generations. This disaster threatening the inner worlds is made by intelligent minds . . . There is something you must all see. Come here.”

They all got up from the table and moved to the mass of machinery which Dick had said resembled a telescope. He was not far wrong, either. A vast rotunda of metal reached up to the cavern roof, was bolted there. At its lower end, in the floor, was a circular reflector of

mercury. Gears and controls were numberless, manned by the five other scientists now awaiting Ralgo's orders.

"What you are about to witness may seem miraculous to you," Ralgo stated. "You have perhaps 300 or 400 inch reflectors with which to scan the heavens, relying purely on light reception. You have not a telescope like this which catches the flying electrons driven from the objective itself, electrons hurled across the gulf by light pressure from the planet under observation. Those electrons can be, and are, built up here by this instrument into a mosaic pattern. The result is an X-ray view of our objective at extremely close quarters. Now watch . . ."

The lights expired, leaving only the spotlights over the control boards. The five bearded scientists began to work in perfect unison. The mercury mirror glowed blindingly bright, then changed to black, studded with gleaming stars as it mirrored the cosmos.

"Naturally, the electrons we trap pass through the rocks with perfect ease," Ralgo commented.

The three said nothing. The view of stars apparently moving towards them made them feel horribly dizzy—then they steadied as a majestic planet loomed into view—the well recognizable equatorially bulging mass of Jupiter, complete with his belts of cloud.

Again Ralgo spoke. "We are of course following the electron paths back to their source, hence we move at the speed of light."

Even so, it took nearly forty-five minutes to span the gulf to the giant world. Even then the onward rush did not cease. The view plunged downwards through the dense cloudbanks into a land of murky, depressing twilight—a land that was, in the main, red rock, in the center of which was an enormous transparent dome, housing beneath it a vast but incredibly efficient city.

CHAPTER VI

“DESTROY!”

At a word from Ralgo, the instrument halted its uncanny progress.

“Jupiter,” he said slowly. “A world which your astronomers know from their spectroscopic tests is mainly atmosphered with ammoniated hydrogen at a temperature of 120 degrees below zero Centigrade. That certainly obtains over vast areas of the planet, the parts which, because of fiendish tempests and unutterable cold, are totally inimical to life of any type . . . But on another portion of the surface, known to you as the 8,000 mile Great Red Spot—which you see now in the mirror—Jovian scientists have made a part of their terrible world habitable. They breathe, inside that dome, an atmosphere of pure oxygen and hydrogen.”

“But,” Fletcher said, “they’d burn without nitrogen, wouldn’t they?”

“Only if water vapor were present as the mixing agent, which of course it isn’t. They’ve taken good care to eliminate that . . . Inside that dome they are cut off from the tempests of their world, are working out a scheme of their own which has been handed down through generations. They have vast knowledge, these people, enormous scientific resources—and what is worse, they have the indomitable courage to carry out their aims.”

“You mean—the shrinkage?” Dick whispered.

“In part, yes.” Ralgo brooded a moment. “They desire the conquest of the universe. They have resolved to crush distant worlds under their own dogmatic sway, institute a reign of inflexible scientific control in which they will unquestionably be masters. I speak of distant worlds—so far distant they are invisible from this system, but the Jovians know of them . . . And the Jovians can win!

“But, for this conquest they need a terrific source of natural power—the sun. They need his energy to drive their machines, to bring their aims to fruition. They knew that centuries ago, and that was when their scheme started . . .”

“But at their vast distance from the sun they can’t utilize it, surely?” Fletcher questioned.

“That was exactly what they discovered,” Ralgo replied. “To get near enough to the sun for their purpose meant being as close to it as Earth is—closer, if possible. They can’t shift their planet; but they *can* use natural balances. First they reflected solar forces back from their distant world onto the planets of the inner system, forces which they had amplified and then converted—projecting them on electromagnetic beams—and these forces through the generations acted as a compressing agent on matter structure. Atoms began to close up—hence the shrinkage. In the end the planets will be destroyed—then what will happen?

“Jupiter’s unopposed bulk will obey the pull of the sun and swing gradually in towards it. The outer planets will follow, and according to celestial mechanics, Jupiter will finally end up a trifling ninety million miles from the sun in an orbit slightly nearer than Earth’s is now . . . The object will have been achieved—nearness to the sun to use the power. And it *can* be done—as we six have bitter reason to know . . .”

There was a momentary silence. Then Dick blurted out:

“But we can’t let them get away with this! They’re simply destroying this part of the universe to further their own ends! They—”

“Look at them for yourselves,” Ralgo murmured.

The view had changed on the mirror. There was a vision of titanic workshops, crammed from end to end with orderly, vast machinery. The Jovians themselves, busy with their work, were singularly revolting to human standards. They were little better than flat disks, the flat side to the ground and supported on six blocky legs. For arms they had whiplike tentacles; for a head, a bulbous affair that seemed all eyes. Even through the medium of the telescope there was something about their slow, ordered deliberation that conveyed the idea of banal, pitiless intellect.

“They’re horrible!” Fay screamed suddenly. “Utterly horrible!”

Ralgo nodded slowly, made a signal. The telescope shifted again through countless powerhouses, through the entire machine city of the Jovians under its protective dome. There seemed no place for resting or quiet: everything was concentrated on gigantic purpose.

“Originally,” Ralgo said, “these master scientists were creatures of the ammoniated, tempest ridden lands. By degrees, though, even as earthly man has done, they emerged from those wilds to better things. They produced a more breathable atmosphere, mastered part of their world. Now you see the ultimate Jovians, convinced they can defeat the universe . . .”

“And so far as we’re concerned, they will,” Dick muttered. “We can’t possibly fight against such inhuman monstrosities, particularly with their mastery of natural forces. Even you must admit that, Ralgo?”

The scientist shook his head. “No—I don’t! My comrades and I slept through the generations for the very purpose of crushing these beings, of saving the universe from them . . .”

He turned, had the instrument switched off. The lights came up.

“Just why are you so anxious to overcome these creatures when with that space-ship you could travel far beyond their reach?” asked Fletcher slowly, and he nodded to the dismantled flyer.

“Our plan is—vengeance,” Ralgo replied steadily.

“I don’t get it.”

“You’ve probably been thinking we belong to an early earthly civilization, or another world where the people are similar to you? You are mistaken. We are Jovians . . .”

“Huh?” Dick ejaculated. “But we just saw some Jovians, and—”

“We were like them once.” Ralgo eyed the three in faint amusement. “Generations ago, as so often happens in a small community, there was a great deal of conflict in the scientific city you have just seen. Some scientists—my friends and I to be exact—wanted triumph to come from progressive scientific achievement and amity. Others, more powerful, desired it otherwise, were bent on the plan of conquest you already know. We were helpless against that edict—were outlawed into space and warned to never return . . . We cruised, found only empty worlds until we came to this one.

“Maybe it was chance that caused us to drop in this lush valley. We perceived that to breathe your atmosphere and stand your gravity we would need physical alterations—so we patterned our bodies to the shape of the apelike men we occasionally saw in the surrounding jungles. It was easy with the surgical instruments we had aboard. Then we hollowed out these caverns, dismantled our space machine . . .

“We went into conference. There was a chance that our enemies on Jove would find their plan impracticable and be forced to abandon it. On the other hand, they might succeed, and if so only the passage of unnumbered years could show it. How to span those years? Not by ordinary waiting, for we would die and had no women with us to bear children. We could only

rely on suspended animation and the chance that one day a living being would revive us . . . The rest you know . . . So, we seek vengeance—vengeance on the children of the men who outlawed us, vengeance on our world for daring to make so heinous an experiment.”

“You six against all that lot?” Fletcher said dubiously. “I can’t believe in that, Ralgo. Best thing you can do is pass this information on to our own people. We’ll build space-machines and then go to war against these creatures . . .”

“Against *their* science?” Ralgo smiled faintly. “You’d be mown down like grass. No, there are other ways—simple but vastly destructive ways. Your world possesses one element which is lacking on Jove, and for that one element we are prepared to trade you all the scientific instruments we have here, barring the space-ship.”

“But—but you can’t mean *all* these valuable machines?” Dick gasped.

“Why not? We shan’t need them in a while—and as I understand it your people have learned the folly of war and could make good use of these instruments. You have seen the telescope, which can further your astronomy—then there is synthetic food creation, cold light, atomic force heat borers, a myriad things. Each one is foolproof; as your engineers study them they cannot possibly hurt themselves from wrong connections. Space travel we shall retain.”

“They’ll—they’ll net a fortune beyond dreams,” muttered Fay breathlessly. “We’ve spent a good deal coming here and— But what are *you* going to do?” she asked quickly.

“Destroy!” With cold impartiality Ralgo turned aside.

CHAPTER VII

END OF A RACE

Ralgo and his comrades became so busy in the hours that followed that there was hardly any chance to question them on their scheme. All the three could do was watch events, and by degrees they beheld the erection of a small but exceedingly efficient space-machine from the machinery and plates that had been laid aside.

At intervals they slept, awakening to find further progress—until at length, possibly days afterwards, the space-machine was complete and mounted on massive runners. A small tractor, driven by atomic force, drew it slowly out of the cavern through a newly-fashioned aperture devised for the purpose.

Fay, Dick, and Fletcher followed to the exterior, stood breathing in the fresh, early dawn air, gazing out over the mists of the valley.

“There is not much more to tell,” Ralgo said, after his five companions had joined him. “It is perfectly obvious that we are men without a planet—nor have we any wish to trespass on this world where you have your destiny to work out. Our course lies in duty to our own world, and if in that duty we sacrifice ourselves and save other worlds from the enslavement of science gone mad, what does it matter?”

“But you’re not going to *kill* yourselves?” Dick cried in horror.

“Only in order that we may kill others who deserve to die . . .” Ralgo smiled very slightly. “Death is not so terrible a thing when you understand science . . .”

“You spoke of an element that we have on Earth—which we are to give you in return for your machines,” Fletcher said. “What is that element? Name it—it’s yours, if obtainable. What is it you want that can possibly destroy the Jovians?”

“I have it already,” Ralgo answered calmly. “It is water—H₂O, as you call it. In this ship, fixed over the nose trapdoor of the machine, are two large cylinders of pure water. Also on these containers are several detonators. When those containers are released onto the dome over the Jovian city they will explode and smash the dome, releasing the water. The rest will be scientific law. With the presence of water, the oxygen and hydrogen in the dome will unite with fiendish force, will be fired by the explosion of the cylinders themselves. There can be only one answer . . . Every living thing in that oxyhydrogen stretch will be instantly burned to a cinder . . . The Jovian race will be exterminated.”

“But look here,” Fay broke in suddenly, seizing Ralgo’s arm, “why do you need to sacrifice yourselves in this work? If you won’t have Earth, what’s to stop you going on living on Jupiter when your enemies are eliminated?”

“With these bodies, and Jove’s gravitation? No, Fay; when we changed our bodies to Earthly form we took an irrevocable step. We cannot change them again . . .”

Ralgo stopped, stood looking at the silent three for a moment, then he said quietly, “If you are interested in this final move, you can follow our progress in the telescope. It is already turned on Jupiter. Depress the last switch on the right hand side of the board . . . That’s all. And now—”

He merely gave another of his tolerant, wisely smiles, then turned and entered the airlock. It closed.

Five minutes later, blue smoke drifting on the hot wind alone announced where the spaceship had been . . .

It was several days, however, before the stupendously fast Jovian flyer made any appearance in the telescope—prior to which the three curbed their impatience as best they could by studying the machinery that had been left to them. They finally arrived at the conclusion that most of it would advance earthly science at least a hundred years, to say nothing of the untold financial benefit they would reap . . .

Then everything was incontinently forgotten as Fay, the first to notice the speck in the mirror that denoted the flyer over the dome of Jove, gave a hoarse shout.

“It’s in view—a bit blurred, but maybe that’s because the ship’s not yet in the focus of the planet . . .”

Immediately Fletcher and Dick joined her. The three of them stood eagerly watching as the blurry speck began to assume clarity, until at last it was poised directly over that massive dome. It was obvious the Jovian scientists had noticed nothing so far.

Gradually the machine lowered—then suddenly from its nose dropped two faintly discernible specks. There was an aching pause: the three held their breath involuntarily, then they blinked at two dazzling flashes as the cylinders struck the dome beneath. What happened afterwards was a mad confusion—a glimpse of Hades.

Flame, incredibly bright, spouted outwards and across every portion of the dome, swept up to a bewildering incandescence as oxygen, hydrogen and water united in a common blast of fury . . . The space machine itself, without slackening momentum, plunged downwards and vanished in the smother . . .

The three before the mirror stared through half-closed eyes . . .

When at last they were able to look properly, there was only a burned-out black hulk where the dome had been—a hulk dotted with twisted, irretrievably ruined machinery.

“They made it!” Fletcher whispered. “Destroyed everything.”

“As far as the efficiency of the water combination stretched, yes,” Dick admitted. “Presumably the ammoniated hydrogen air has closed in now over the gap . . .” He took a deep breath, straightened up. “Well, I guess that lets us out. The sun, though further away, is still O.K. for our purposes, and that danger of disaster is removed . . .”

He swung round suddenly to Fay—but she was at the other end of the cavern.

“Come here!” she cried excitedly. “Here’s a radio set! We were wondering how to find our way back home. We don’t need to wonder any longer . . . Come on—get in touch with New York. Send for Government representatives . . . Then we’ll start to talk in big money.”

“I think,” said Fletcher gravely, “she’s got something there.”

[The end of *Men Without a World* by John Russell Fearn]