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CHAMELEON PLANET

by POLTON CROSS



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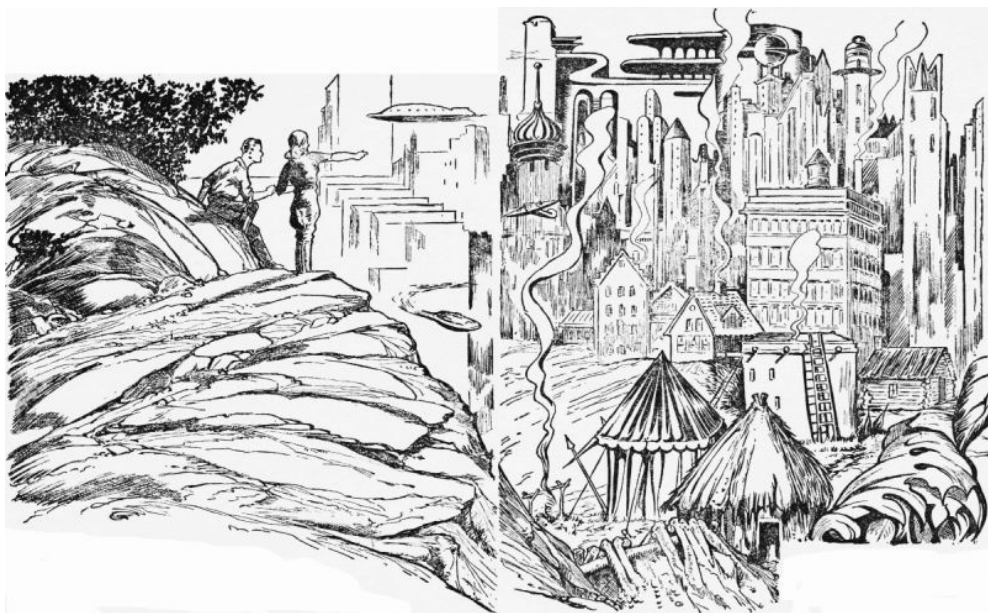
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CHAMELEON PLANET

By

John Russell Fearn

Writing under the pseudonym Polton Cross.

First published *Astonishing Stories*, February 1940.

*Life was speeded up on Chameleon Planet—where an ape could become a Superman
between meals!*

CHAPTER ONE

The Flying World

Space ship 17 of the American Interplanetary Corporation moved at the cruising velocity of 90,000 miles a second through the barren endlessness at the eastern limb of the Milky Way Galaxy, pursuing its journey in search of new worlds to be colonized or claimed in the name of the Corporation.

In the vessel's compact control room, ace colonizer Archer Lakington stood moodily gazing out into the void, gray eyes mirroring the abstract nature of his thoughts. His broad but hunched shoulders gave the clue to his boredom. Speeding through infinity without a trace of excitement or interest was anathema to his adventurous soul. This had been going on now for eight weeks. . . .

At length he turned aside and surveyed his instruments. The long range detector needle was rigidly fixed on zero. The moment any possible world came within range, even though invisible to the eye, an alarm would ring by the actuation of a highly sensitive photo-electric cell. The detector, responding, would immediately fix the position of the disturbance.

"The more I see of space the more I think I'm a mug to be cruising around in it," he growled at last, hands in the pockets of his leather cardigan. "I'm getting a sort of yen to be back amongst the smells of New York, seeing familiar faces, telling tales of conquest over a glass of viska water."

"While you're seeing familiar faces don't forget President Bentley's," a dry feminine voice reminded him.

He twisted round and surveyed the bush of yellow hair just visible over the top of the wall couch. Elsie, his wife—his sole partner in this endless journeying—was pursuing her usual occupation when things got monotonous; simply lying down with her hands locked behind her head. She turned a pair of level cool blue eyes toward him as she felt the strength of his gaze.

"You don't have to remind me about Bentley," he said gruffly. "If he wasn't President of the Corporation I'd head back right now for New York!"

"You mean you're scared?"

"Scared nothing!" he snapped. "I mean I'm—"

He broke off and twirled round with delighted eyes as the detector alarm abruptly clanged into noisy action. In an instant he was squatting before the instruments, keenly studying their reactions. He scarcely noticed that, true to duty, the girl was crouched beside him, her slender fingers twirling the calibrated knobs and controls.

Without a word to each other they began to check and calculate carefully. The lenses of the detector came into use and visually picked up the cause of the distant alarm. When they had both gazed long and earnestly they looked blankly at each other.

"Gosh!" Elsie exclaimed, startled. "That's the fastest planet I ever saw! Did you see it, Arch? Flying round its Sun like a bullet?"

He puzzled silently for a moment, then stooped down and again sighted the strange distant world in the powerful sights. Clear and distinct it was, a planet perhaps only slightly smaller than Earth, but behaving as no self-respecting planet should. Alone in its glory, apparently sheathed in ice, it was pursuing a highly eccentric orbit round its quite normal dwarf type Sun.

Starting from a close perihelion point it went sweeping out in a wild curve, zigzagged sharply at one place on its route with a force that looked strong enough to tear it clean out of its path—then it pulled back again and went sailing at terrific speed to remote aphelion almost beyond visual range. A mad, silly little world obviously under the pull of gigantic gravitational fields—perhaps dead stars lurking unseen in the vast void. And as it went its surface coloring changed weirdly.

“Some world!” Arch commented, as he straightened up. “We ought to be near it in about two hours if we step on it. Not that it will be much good though. The darn thing’s frozen solid —”

“If you were more of a scientist and less of a fathead we might do some useful work,” Elsie remarked tartly, herself now peering through the lenses. “That world is only ice-sheathed at aphelion limit but becomes all green and gold at perihelion,” she went on. “Sort—sort of chameleon planet,” she finished hazily, looking up.

“Spectrum warp, probably in the lenses,” said Arch wisely; but she gave an unwomanly snort.

“Spectrum warp my eye! Don’t try and avoid the issue! That’s a planet that may have something worth while on it, even if it does hold the cosmic speed record. You wanted relief from monotony—and you’ve got it! Grab yourself a control panel and restore my faith in husbands.”

Arch gave a mock salute and squatted down. Giving the power to the silent rocket tubes he increased the smoothly cruising perpetual speed of the vessel to the maximum 160,000 miles a second, sent it plunging like a silver bullet through the cosmos while the girl, rigid over the instruments, rapped out instructions in her terse, half cynical voice.

True to calculation, the vessel came within close range of the flying world 120 minutes later, keeping pace with it in its hurtling journey.

Puzzled, the two looked down on its surface and watched the strange spreads of color that suffused it at varied points of its orbit. The nearer it came to the Sun the grayer it became, seemed to actually cover itself with clouds—then it moved on again at top speed, merging from gray to green, to blue, fading down into red, then white, and resolving at aphelion into primary black only barely distinguishable against the utter platinum-dust dark of space.

“Chameleon planet is right!” Arch breathed, fascinated. “I still don’t see though how we can colonize it. It’s just a haywire rocket.”

“Never mind talking about fireworks—descend and have a look at it!” the girl counselled. “It may have valuable ores or some kind of salvage worth collecting. Wait until it gets nearest the Sun and then drop down. At the rate it’s going that will be at any moment. . . .” Her eyes followed it speculatively as it raced away into space.

Arch bent more closely over his controls, easing the vessel sideways from the planet’s gravitational pull. With tensed muscles he waited. His gaze, along with the girl’s, followed every movement of that hurtling globe as it suddenly began its return trip.

He gripped the major control switches tightly and began to jockey the vessel round, twisting it in a great arc and then flattening out as the racehorse planet tore past.

His judgment was superb—the machine leveled out at 1,000 feet above the gray, turbulent surface. Working dexterously he drove the nose downwards, plunged into the midst of the gray and found to his satisfaction that it was cloud, cushioning atmosphere that broke the

terrific down rush of the ship and eased her gently to a surface that was spongy and steaming with amazing warmth.

The vessel dropped softly at last in the center of a small clearing, surrounded by immense trees. They rose on every hand in fantastic array, their lower boles as smooth as billiard balls and bluey gray in color. Beyond this shiny, bald space they sprouted into circular tiers of similar hue, oddly like hundreds of umbrellas piled on top of each other.

Even as the startled two looked at them through the window they visibly grew and added fresh veined vegetational domes to their height, quivered in the mystic ecstasy of some inner life. Nor were they isolated in their queerness. . . . In the midst of the lushy soil, vines of vivid green twirled their roots and tendrils in and out of stolid looking, bellying bushes like Gargantuan mushrooms. Everywhere, in every direction, was a swelling, tangling wilderness of stubbed, crazy shapes—here bulging, there elongating, like the irrelevant, frightening illusions of a nightmare.

“Life—gone mad!” murmured Arch soberly, then he turned away and glanced at the external meters. He felt vaguely satisfied at finding an atmosphere compatible with Earth’s, a gravity almost identical, but a temperature and humidity equalling that of the Carboniferous Age.

“Breathable, but as hot as hell,” Elsie said expressively, gazing over his shoulder. “We could go outside without helmets. The sun’s clouded so I guess pith hats will do.”

Arch glanced again at the fantastical, swaying life.

“It’s a risk,” he said dubiously. “I don’t mean the air—the form of life.”

“What do explorers usually do? Get cold feet?” Elsie demanded. “If you won’t go, I will. That’s flat!”

Arch caught the challenge in her bright blue eyes. He nodded a trifle reluctantly. “O.K., we’ll chance it, if only to grab a few specimens. We’ll take full precautions, though. Fit up our packs with complete space suits as well as provisions. Use the space-bags; they’ll stand any conditions. I’ll look after the portable tent and flame guns.”

“Check!” she nodded eagerly, and went blithely singing into the adjoining storage closet.

CHAPTER TWO

Dinosaurs and Umbrella Trees

Five minutes later, surrounded by surging waves of sickly greenhouse warmth, they were standing together just outside the ship, the airlock securely fastened behind them. Their backs were loaded with full pack, Arch bearing the larger accoutrement in the form of a strong but collapsible vulsanite metal tent.

In silent dubiousness they looked around them on the umbrella trees and tangled shooting life that sprouted with insane fervor on every hand. Despite the heavy, drifting clouds they could feel the intense heat of the Sun beating down through the protection of their pith helmets, its ultra violet radiations tingling the skin of their bare arms. They began to perspire freely.

“Well, bright eyes, what’s your suggestion?” Arch asked querulously. “Looks to me as if wandering in this tangle will make us perform a complete vanishing trick.”

“We’re explorers, not magicians,” the girl answered briefly. “Obviously the planet’s no good for colonization but we can at least grab a few of these plants for specimens. Let’s go!”

She stepped forward boldly, flame pistol firmly gripped in her hand.

Arch looked after her slim figure for a moment, then with a resigned shrug prepared to follow her. Mentally he decided that the whole excursion was only fit for lunatics. . . . He moved, like the girl, with studied care, glancing around and below him at the twisting vines and sprouting shave-grass. Here and there in the patches of damp loam there frothed areas infested with minute, scuttling life, and, for every step he took, he had to dodge aside to avoid a wickedly spired carmine-hued stem as it rose like a livid bayonet from alluvial soil.

So intent was he in guarding himself, indeed—in surveying the ground, he momentarily forgot the girl, until a sudden wild shout from ahead caused him to look up with a start.

Horrified and amazed he came to an abrupt halt. Elsie was rising upwards into the air in front of the nearest umbrella tree, the carmine stem of a bayonet-bamboo thrust through the tough leather belt about her waist! Struggling wildly, she reared up to a height of thirty feet, striving frantically to free herself and calling in hysterical fright.

The ludicrous figure she cut set Arch laughing for a moment—then with a single slash from his flame gun he cut the plant in two and broke the girl’s fall as she came toppling down breathlessly into his arms.

“We’ve no time to play at acrobats,” he reproved her drily, as she straightened her rumpled clothing. “You ought to know better, Mrs. Lakington.”

“Could I help it if the thing grew while I was studying an umbrella tree?” she demanded wrathfully. “This place is so darned swift you need a time machine to keep up with it! I’m going back to the ship before worse things happen!”

She broke off as she half turned. Dismay settled on her pretty face at the sight of spreading, spiraling masses of incredible growth. In the few brief minutes occupied in her bayonet-stem adventure the clearing had changed utterly.

Wild, rampant growth had sprouted up soundlessly on all sides, had already hidden the ship from view. Colors, weird and flamboyant, provided a criss-crossing maze of bewildering interlacings. Umbrella trees, bayonet-bamboos, bile-green vines, swelling objects like puff

balls—they were all there, creaking in the hot, heavy air with the very speed of their growth, providing a blur of vivid colors that was eye-aching.

Arch did not need to be told that the ship was fast being smothered. The girl's sudden startled silence was sufficient. For a moment he was nonplussed, then gripping her by the arm he plunged forward towards the tangled mass with flame gun spouting in a vicious arc, but even before he had the chance of seeing what happened an intense, saturating darkness flooded down.

"Now what?" he yelped, in exasperated alarm. "Have I darn well gone blind or—"

"No, Arch; it's night!" The girl's voice quavered a trifle as her hand gripped his arm. "At the terrific speed this planet rotates and moves the day's already exhausted! We'll have to try — Ouch!"

She broke off and staggered in the darkness as a vicious unseen thorn stabbed the bare flesh of her arm. Arch drew her more tightly to him and switched on his belt torch. The clear beam revealed the solid, impregnable mass on every side.

Bewildered, they stumbled round, all sense of direction confused. Razor-edged masses were springing up now, mercilessly sharp, leaving slashes on their tough leather gum boots. . . . Gripping each other they moved onwards, literally forced to do so to escape the mad life twirling insanelly around them.

Twice they blundered into an umbrella tree, reeling aside only just in time to escape the sudden sharp closing of its upper folds. It seemed to be more a mystic reflex action than actual carnivorous strain.

At last the girl halted as they came into a slightly quieter region.

"Look here, Arch, what are we going to do?" she panted. "In case you don't know it we're completely lost!"

He stared at her torch-illuminated face. "I'm open to suggestions. We can't find the ship again in this stuff, that's a certainty. We have provisions to last a month, and in that time—"

"A month!" she echoed, moving quickly as she felt an avid vine shooting over her feet.

"How do you figure we're going to survive a month in this hole? We'll be stabbed or strangled long before that!"

"Wonder what causes it?—the growth speed, I mean." Arch's voice came musingly out of the dark. "Incredibly fast plant mutations must have some cause behind them. Maybe something to do with the planet's orbital speed. Even time seems different here. From space this world looked to be revolving like a humming top, yet now we're on it night and day seem to arrive normally—"

He stopped short as at that identical moment the stifling, terrible dark suddenly vanished and gave place to daylight again. The glare of the cloud shielded Sun flooded down on the wild growth which, in the case of the umbrella trees at least, had already achieved cloud scraping proportions.

"Normal, huh?" the girl questioned laconically, but she was obviously relieved.

"Well, if not normal, it at least resembles day and night," Arch amended. "I expected something so swift that we'd encounter a sort of winking effect."

Elsie said nothing to that; her eyes were traveling anxiously round the confusion. The thought of the vanished space ship, the absolute craziness of everything, was obsessing her mind.

“Only thing to do is to keep on going,” Arch decided at length. “Maybe we’ll find a place to pitch camp and lay further plans.”

“I wish I shared your optimism,” the girl sighed enviously, then easing the burden of her pack she prepared to follow him. . . .

Forced to keep moving by reason of circumstances the two blasted their way with flame guns through the crazy rampancy ahead of them. Confused, bewildered, they found themselves constantly confronted with things defying understanding.

One particularly vicious type of plant, which they nicknamed the “bellow bulb,” caused them a good deal of trouble. Lying in the soppy soil like a bladder, it released a powerful lethal gas when trodden on. More than once they found themselves tottering away from these things on the verge of unconsciousness.

But at last they became thankfully aware of the fact that the insane growth of the jungle was ceasing. The vast agglomeration of trees and plants seemed to have reached maximum size: there was no longer danger from slicing barbs, blades and thorns. . . . Once they realized a passive state had been achieved they sank down gratefully on one of the ground-level vines and took their first nourishment.

“Wish I could figure it out!” Arch muttered worriedly, twirling a tabloid round his tongue.

“Looks to me as though this is a sort of swamp age,” the girl muttered, thinking. “The plants have stopped growing: by all normal laws they ought to start collapsing to form future coal— Oh, but what am I saying!” she exclaimed hopelessly. “It isn’t possible for that to happen. That’s the work of ages.”

“On a normal world it is—but here we have a world opposed to normal,” Arch pointed out. “Since orbital speed is so swift it is possible that evolution might be the same way. Remember that the space plants scattered in the crater floors of the moon pass through their whole existence in the span of a lunar month. On earth a similar occurrence would demand ages. On this chameleon-like planet anything might happen. . . .”

“Might!” the girl echoed. “It *does*!”

Arch fell silent, vaguely perplexed, then he aroused himself to speak again.

“Guess we might as well pitch camp here for the time being,” he said briefly. “We need rest before we think out the return trip—granting there’ll ever be any! Give me a hand.”

The girl came willingly to his assistance as he slid the portable shelter from his back. In the space of a few minutes the ultra modern contrivance with its hinges, brackets and angles was snapped into position, its slotted little beds sliding into fixtures as the four walls were clamped.

Grateful for the protection from the fierce ultra violet radiations of the clouded Sun, the two scrambled inside and pulled off their provision packs; then for a while they sat together on the edge of the beds, gazing through the open doorway . . . until Arch stiffened abruptly as his keen gray eyes detected a slight movement in the nearby undergrowth. Instantly his hand went to the flame pistol in his belt.

“What—what *is* it?” breathed Elsie in amazement, gazing with him as there emerged into view a remarkable object like a monstrous earwig, two bone encrusted eyes watching from the midst of a rattish face.

“Outside insect,” Arch said quickly. “Harmless, I guess.”

He lowered his gun and waited tensely, in increasing amazement, as between shave-grass and creeping-plants huge salamanders pulled themselves into sight, their queer three-eyed, crescent shaped skulls giving the effect of Satanic grimace.

Scorpions came next, armed with viciously poisoned needles that quivered like daggers on protruding whip-like tails. Insects began to flit about—titanophasmes, as big as eagles. Above the tops of the lower lying liana dragon-flies with yard-wide wings streaked swiftly. . . . Nor was that all. There were immense grasshoppers, millipeds as big as pumpkins, nauseous spiders dangling on ropy threads. . . . A hideous and incredible vision.

The two sat for perhaps fifteen minutes anxiously studying the creatures, when night fell again with its former startling suddenness. Day has lasted exactly two hours!

Arch gently closed the door and switched on his torch.

Elsie's face was strained—her efforts to conceal fear were pretty futile.

"Two hours day; two hours night," she said nervously. "This place is crazy, Arch! And those horrible things outside! You're not suggesting we stop here with them around, are you?"

"What do you propose?" he asked quietly. "We daren't go outside—we'd be worse off than ever. No; the only thing to do is to stick it and hope for the best, hard though it is."

The girl shuddered a little. "Guess you're right, but it's not going to be easy."

She relapsed into silence. After a time Arch opened the door again and risked using his flashlight to see exactly what was transpiring outside. To the utter surprise of both of them the jungle was collapsing! The entire mad growth was breaking up into dried sticks and dust. . . .

And the insects! They scuttled round in the confusion, yet not for a moment did they look the same. By lightning changes they increased in size, lost their insectile appearance and became ensheathed in scaly armor. The stupendous dragon-fly creatures whizzing overhead grew larger with the moments, also achieved a protective covering that pointed beyond doubt to a reptilian strain. . . .

Until finally, by the time daylight arrived once more, a new metamorphosis was complete. The two gazed out in awe on a scene magically different—evolution had slid by in a brief two-hour night! Another jungle was rising, but of a more delicate, refined nature, from the ruins of the old. Ferns of considerable size had sprouted in the clearing—behind them in fast growing banks were gently waving masses bearing strong resemblance to earthly cycads and conifers.

But nowhere was there a flower: only the fantastically colored vegetation held back from crazy growth by some new mutational law in the planet's inexplicable chemistry.

"If we set back for the space ship now we might find it," Elsie remarked anxiously. "The going would be simpler, anyhow."

"So far as the jungle is concerned, yes," Arch agreed; "but there are other perils. Look over there!"

He nodded his head to the opposite side of the clearing and the girl recoiled a little as she beheld a vast head of gray, the face imbecilic in expression, waving up and down on the end of a long neck. Flexible, rubbery lips writhed in avid satisfaction as the extraordinary beast lazily ate the soft, fast growing leaves of the smaller trees. Once, as the wind parted the vegetation for a moment, there was a vision of vast body and tail.

"Why, it's—it's an iguanodon!" she cried in horror, but Arch shook his head.

"Not exactly it, but very much like it. Herbivorous, of course. . . . You know, it's just beginning to dawn on me what's wrong with this planet—why life on it is so crazy."

"Well, although I'm glad to hear the brain has finally started to function, I'm still anxious to get back to the ship," the girl said worriedly. "We can risk the monsters. That herb-eater is harmless enough, anyhow."

“But it won’t be the only type,” Arch reminded her grimly. “There’ll be all kinds of things abroad—perhaps as frightful as our own one-time diplodocus and allosaurus.”

“You mean we stop here?” Elsie’s eyes were on the gray head. The swarming plant life had now almost hidden it.

“Until man comes, anyhow,” Arch said reflectively.

At that the girl twisted round from the doorway and stared at him amazedly.

“Until man comes!” she echoed. “Now I know you’re crazy! If you think I’m going to sit here while these playboys grow up through millions of years you’re mistaken! I’m heading back right now for the ship!”

“In what direction?” Arch asked sweetly, and she pursed her lips.

“I’ll find it!” Her tone was defiant. “I’ve got a wrist compass just the same as you have!”

Arch shrugged and leaned more comfortably against the doorway. For a while he heard the determined little bustling movements of the girl behind him—then her activity slowed down a little. At length he found her beside him.

“Maybe you’re right,” she admitted, with a rueful pout. “But at least you might tell me what you’re getting at.”

“It’s simple enough. Evolution on this world is straightforward, fast though it is. The only way it differs is in that it passes through it mutations all at one sweep of existence instead of dying and being born again, in a more adaptive style. The giant creatures of this moment are the very same insects and millipeds we saw last night—same minds, only changed outwardly by an amazing mutational process. Since this planet has such a weird orbit it probably accounts for it. Its close approach to the Sun at perihelion produces Carboniferous Age conditions: as it recedes further away the condition will cool to normal, finally reaching a frozen glacial state compatible only with earth’s last days. What I’m wondering is, what will happen when we reach that zig-zag part in this planet’s orbit. May be trouble.”

The girl puzzled for a moment. “Oddly enough, Arch, I believe your mutational idea is dead right, though how you figured it out all by yourself is beyond me. What became of the First Glacial Epoch, though? That should have appeared between the insect and mammalian stages.”

“Because it happened on earth doesn’t say it must happen here. In fact it’s wholly unlikely. Life here will simply progress from warmth to cold, and during that period we’ll have a pretty good simile of the lines earthly evolution will take. This planet being practically the same in mass and atmosphere it isn’t unusual that similar life to earth’s should evolve.”

Elsie looked out over the changing forest, her brows knitted. For an instant her gaze caught the gray hurtling form of monstrous archaeopteryx—a natural helicopter.

“Evolution like that seems so impossible,” she muttered.

“Why?” Arch objected. “On the contrary it’s very sensible. Death, and thereby a possible break in the continuity of knowledge, is done away with. Besides, there is a biological parallel to bear it all out.”

“Meaning what?”

“Meaning that a human embryo before it is born undergoes in nine months all the primeval states. The fertilized egg form from which the human biped develops is, in the first instance, a primeval amoeba. In the nine months of its genesis it performs, unseen except by X-ray, the very incredible fast evolution we see here in actual fact. First the amoebical cell, then clustered cells like a mulberry—a globular animalcule. It then moves on to the fish stage and shows visible gills: it traverses the scale of the lower invertebrates. Fishes, amphibians,

reptiles, lower mammals, semi-apes, human apes, and lastly *homo sapiens* are all passed through. Then the child is born. If it can happen invisibly to a human embryo, why not here in the form we behold? Maybe it is the only way Nature can operate. Being pressed for time, as it were.”

“You think then that man will appear in, say, two days?” the girl questioned thoughtfully.

“Not quite so soon, perhaps, but certainly before very long. It may represent inconceivably long generations to this life, but we measure time by the hours on our watches. The ship won’t hurt in the interval. It’s safely locked anyhow. When this forest dies down to give place to new forms we’ll be able to find it easily enough.”

She nodded agreement and settled herself down again to await developments.

CHAPTER THREE

The Storm

The day was uneventful save for occasional showers of amazing rapidity, and a certain cooling of the air that could only be explained by the amazing planet's rapid orbital recession from the Sun.

During the brief two hours there were multi-alterations, and when the night fell again it was alive with change.

The two listened fearfully to a myriad unfamiliar noises—the screech of unknown birds as they flew close over the camp; the monstrous, avid bellowing of 40-ton beasts—the ground-shaking concussions of their colossal feet. Somewhere something chattered with the hysterical abandon of a hyena.

At brief intervals the two slept from sheer strain and fatigue, until near the time for dawn when they were aroused by a sudden deep bass rumbling in the ground.

“Whatever is it?” Elsie gasped in alarm, leaping up. “Sounds like an explosion. . . .”

She jumped to the door and wrenched it open. Outside, rain was descending in hissing, blinding sheets.

“More like an earthquake,” came Arch's sober voice from the gloom. “Here—grab the provisions and pack in case we have to make a dash for it!”

He snatched at the girl's baggage and thrust it on her shoulders, but almost before he had slipped into his own equipment they were both flung off their feet by a terrific earth tremor.

“It's that zig-zag deviation in this planet's orbit!” Arch gasped, scrambling up again. “We must have reached it. Let's get out of here quick, before the whole camp comes down on top of us!”

“But where do we go?” the girl asked helplessly. “It's raining a deluge outside—”

“Can't help that!” he returned briefly, and hugging her to him they plunged out into the raging dark.

Lucky it was that his foresight had guided him, for they had hardly gained the clearing's center before another tremendous convulsion of the earth overthrew them. A visible ripple raced along the ground in the dawn light, ploughed down swaying trees and shelter in one all inclusive sweep.

Raging, cyclonic wind gripped them as they staggered helplessly towards the rain-lashed jungle. Clutching each other, soaked to the skin, they were whirled along in the midst of crashing trees and ripping, tearing plants. The whole planet seemed to have suddenly gone insane.

Simmering volcanic forces had abruptly come into life, undoubtedly created by that orbit deviation swinging the globe out of normalcy.

Panting and drenched they halted finally in the jungle's depths, crouching down in the rain flattened bushes as a herd of crazed animals thundered past. Mighty brutes, overpowering in their mad hugeness. It was a vast parade of armor-plates, horns, laniary teeth, beaks and claws—the stampeded herd of an incredible saurian age on the verge of yet another weird metamorphosis.

“What do we do next?” Elsie panted, as the earth heaved violently beneath them.

“Only stop as we are until we get a break!” Arch looked worriedly at the sky. Not only was it thick with lowering rain clouds but there also drifted across it the thick acrid smoke columns of volcanic eruption. Somewhere a crater had burst into being.

He turned back to the girl with a remark, but at that exact moment there came a roaring and crashing from the jungle to the rear. He was just in time to see a vast wall of water ploughing forward, bearing everything before it in a towering deluge of driftwood and tumbling vegetation—then he and the girl, clinging frantically to each other, were lifted on high and hurled wildly into the foaming chaos.

They went deep, locked tightly in each other’s embrace, rose up again gasping and struggling for air, threshing wildly in the driftwood as the weight of their packs pulled upon them. In the half light it was difficult to distinguish anything. On every hand there was din and confusion; the piercing shrieks of drowning monsters split the screaming air.

“O.K.?” Arch yelled, clutching the girl to him, and she nodded her plastered head quickly.

“Sure—but I could think of better places to play water polo—What’s that ahead? Land?” She stared through the smother.

“Of sorts,” Arch threw back—and in three minutes they struck shelving ground from which all traces of forest had been blasted by earthquake and tempest.

For a space they could do nothing but lie flat on their backs and gasp for breath, staring at the clearing sky—then little by little it came home to them that the earthquake and tidal wave were spent.

The heavings and tremblings had ceased: the mad little world was itself again. For the first time Sunshine filtered down through the densely packed clouds, gathering strength and intensity until the wet ground was steaming with the intense heat.

Elsie sat up at last and thankfully lowered the pack from her back.

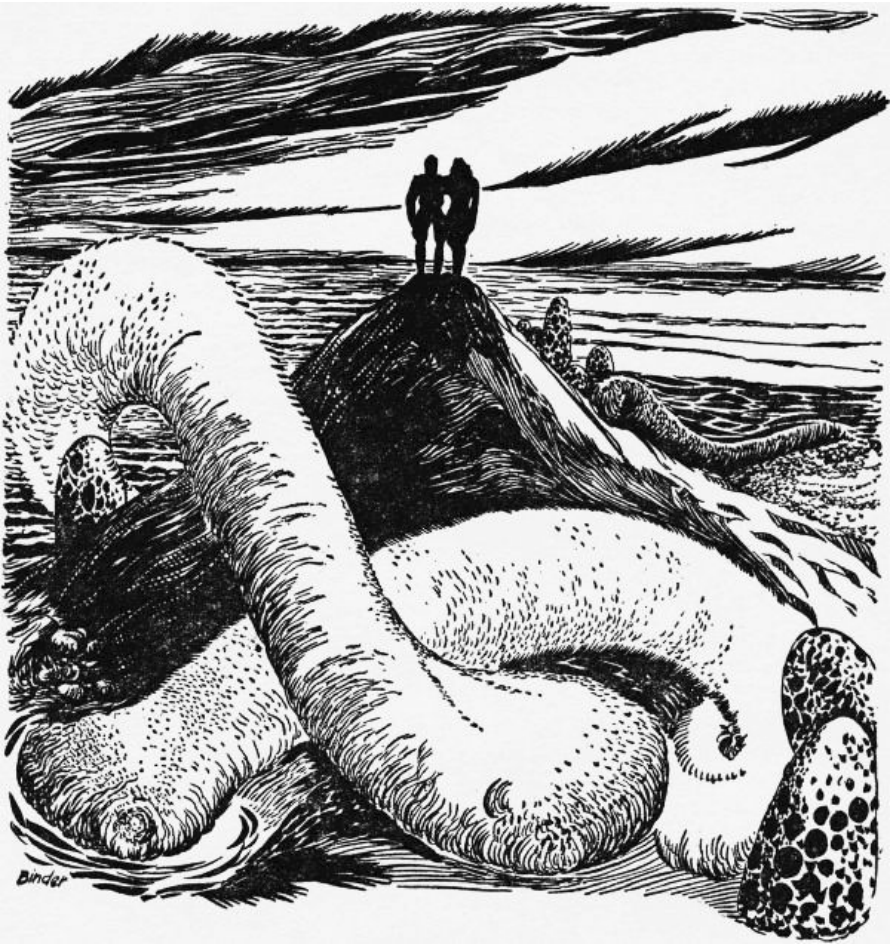
“Well thank Heaven neither water nor space can get through these,” she remarked gratefully. “We can still survive a bit longer, though I certainly have a lurking suspicion that it isn’t going to be easy to find the old space ship after this! Incidentally, Arch, doesn’t it seem to you that it almost matches up—in a shorter version—with the Deluge and terrific re-patterning earth underwent in the early stages?”

He nodded rather gloomily, staring out over the newly formed ocean.

“Very like it,” he admitted. “Nature’s law operating in a slightly different way—eliminating vast numbers of the giant beasts and permitting only a few to remain. Since they possess the powers of adaption without death or heredity they will presumably pattern themselves on a smaller scale now. Everything large will probably have passed away—those things that resembled the dinosaurs, ichthyosauri and pteranodonyes of earth.”

The girl made a wry face. “Boy, can you sling jaw-crackers around!” she murmured, scrambling to her feet. “Still, I guess you’re right. Seems to me we’d better move before some sort of Sun fever gets a hold on us, though at the rate this place moves, I hardly think it’s possible to get ill— Well, what do you know about that!” she finished in astonishment, and pointed to the flat plain behind them.

Arch rose beside her and stood gazing in amazement. The plain was no longer a barren mass but was already thickly wooded in the glare of sunshine, backed at the rear by a newly risen mountain range. They stood looking on foliage that was vaguely familiar, almost earth like—which, considering the planet’s resemblance to the home world wasn’t very surprising.



Dark plane trees, waving oaks, beeches—they were all sprouting and growing upwards rapidly. Amidst the branches there flitted the first signs of birds, the first visible feathered things. A steady humming presently proceeded from the forest—the low and ordered note of bees, dragon-flies, moths, butterflies, and here and there as they watched a stinging specimen of the anthropod genus came into mystic being, chirped loudly, and sped swiftly away into the sunny silences.

“Do things move on this planet!” Arch whistled at length, tentatively fingering his gun. “An hour or two ago they were giant monsters; now they’ve changed again and resolved into the smaller classes— And look at that!” he finished, in a yell of amazement.

Elsie hardly needed his directions. Her eyes were already fixed in astonishment upon a profusion of scampering but none the less recognizable creatures. There were marsupials, waddling armadillos, changing even as they were watched, with incredible swiftness into rodents and hoofed animals. The birds too, as they flew, merged astoundingly into new specimens, slipped swiftly by wild mutations into bats and insect-eaters.

“Pretty little playmates!” Elsie murmured at last. “I guess we might take a closer look. We’re literally between the devil and the deep sea, so what about it?”

Arch nodded. The Sun was already curving down swiftly towards the horizon. Very soon it would be night. The forest for all its wild and peculiar life was a safer and more understandable proposition. Anything might emerge out of the ocean at the coming of nightfall.

They turned and strode forward purposefully. When they reached the forest it seemed to have already attained maximum limit, yet despite its dense profusion, only blasted clear by the flame guns, it was nowhere near the solid impregnability of the earlier jungles—was more natural, more beautiful, sub-tropical.

Darkness fell with its usual blanketing suddenness. Afraid to pause the two went on steadily, beheld things they could not have thought possible. Rats of astounding size occasionally flitted across their vision: some attempted to attack until they were shattered to dust with the guns. In other directions unclassifiable monstrosities lurked in the twisted grass, stared out with great diamond-like eyes or scuttled away into the friendly blackness. The whole place was infested with weird life, some very earthly, some very alien.

Once, as the flashlight circled a wall of vegetation ahead, the two caught a vision of a ridiculous thing like an ostrich running away from them in sudden fright, its bushy tail standing up like an earthly cauliflower.

“A dinoris, or something very like it,” Arch commented. “A forerunner of a future ostrich. Like—”

He stopped dead, muscles tensed and hand tightening on his flame gun as a pair of fiendishly malevolent green eyes blazed suddenly ahead. A body of brilliant stripes moved through the quivering changing-grass.

“Saber-tooth tiger—a genuine pip!” he whispered, clutching the frightened Elsie to him. “No time to take chances. Here goes!”

He fired his gun mercilessly at the very instant of the magnificent creature’s spring. It never ended its leap; simply puffed into ash in mid-air.

“I hate to think what would happen if the guns gave out,” the girl breathed shakily. “This is sure no place for a picnic.”

She fell silent again as they resumed the advance. By the time they had passed through the thick of the jungle and reached the base of the mountain range beyond, the dawn had come again. But it was colder, much colder, and the Sun seemed smaller. . . .

For a time they wandered through the midst of loose rocks, finally singling out a cave opening in the sheer wall of towering cliff. Weary and exhausted they crawled within and flung themselves down in relief, gazing back through the opening towards the rioting confusion of jungle a mile away, and, further away still, the ocean born of the tidal wave.

“Before very long all this will pass away and maybe we’ll glimpse something of modernity—something that thinks, something that will explain why this planet behaves so queerly,” Arch said musingly. “All the same, I think my own ideas are pretty correct.”

Elsie yawned widely. “Well, theory or no theory I’m going to take a rest. This place is too much for me!”

They both pulled off their packs and squatted down, Arch with flame pistol ready as instant protection—but before very long fatigue got the better of his good intentions and, like the girl, he slept soundly.

CHAPTER FOUR

The First Man

When they awoke again it was to the knowledge that, according to their watches, two nights and two days had slid by. The cave was unchanged. Once they had refreshed and eaten they crept to the opening and stared out onto the jungle.

It was different once again—still more refined but still primeval. Here and there first new life forms were moving: bullet-like hairy beings shot from tree to tree with terrific speed. The ape evolution had been gained, was speeding onwards up the scale in absolute unison with the chameleon planet's gradual withdrawal from the Sun.

"If this evolutionary scale is similar to earth's we ought to get another Glacial Epoch around here," Elsie murmured musingly. "It's a good job we brought space suits with us. It's getting pretty cold even as it is."

"There won't be a Glacial period," Arch said with certainty. "Earth's ice age was mainly responsible for the final extinction of the saurians, but here they require no extinction: they simply merge into something fresh like a tadpole metamorphosing into a frog. Those distant apes we can see will be men before we can hardly realize it. Remember that by normal evolution millions of years passed in between states of change—but the speed of ascent from ape to man could be measured in mere thousands of years. That's why it should also go quicker here."

"In the meantime we stop right here then?"

"Sure—it's a safe spot. Why shouldn't we?"

"I was thinking of the space ship."

Arch laughed forlornly. "Swell thought that is! Probably it went west in the earthquake. Even if it did there will soon be life on this amazing world quite capable of building us a new one. You can count on that."

Elsie became silent, staring moodily through the cave opening—then she suddenly stiffened and cried sharply.

"Look down there, Arch! A couple of apes fighting it out to the death! And the smaller one's getting the worst of it, too!"

He joined her in gazing, studied the mighty hairy forms that had emerged from the forest and were battling savagely with bare hands and fighting fangs for the possession of a piece of quivering animal flesh. The speed they fought at made them mere blurs of motion. And even as they fought they were changing swiftly. The heads were broadening out; the teeth and prognathous jaws projecting less.

Finally, the smaller of the two fell backwards, to be immediately pounced upon by the larger. At that Arch jumped to his feet, flame pistol tightly gripped in his hand.

"What's the idea?" Elsie asked in a startled voice.

"A thought's just struck me. We could do with a companion from this world to tell us what it's all about. I'm going to rescue the smaller ape, if I can. Before long he'll be a man. Stay here or come with me. Please yourself."

She scrambled to her feet at that and followed him through the cave opening. Running swiftly together over the loose rubble they gained the fighting pair at last and paused, momentarily appalled by the overpowering fury and speed of the brutes. Beyond doubt it was

a fight to the death. The forest behind was echoing with the gibbering of apes, sub-humans, and queerly fashioned things that had no placeable origin, scuttling wildly through the fastness.

Arch hesitated for a moment, maneuvering for a good position—then as the giant aggressor abruptly stood upright for a final plunge Arch released his flame gun. Vivid streaking energy struck the brute clean in the stomach, blasted his great hairy body into fragments amidst a passing stench of singeing hair and flesh.

“Nice going!” Elsie breathed in delight, then swung round nervously as the other ape got painfully to its feet.

By the time it had fully stood up it was miraculously healed of its injuries and had become less apelike in form, less shaggy. Instead it had all the evidences of an earthly Heidelberg man—huge, hairy and terrible.

Arch backed away gently, flame gun ready, calling to the biped coaxingly.

“We’re friends. Want to help,” he said anxiously. “Don’t try and start anything or I’ll let you have it!”

A momentary silence fell. Even the forest went quieter—changing and sliding strangely into new and complex patterns, whirling in the sea of mutations.

The rescued apeman stood in puzzled bewilderment, grinning diabolically. Elsie drew tightly into Arch’s arm at the sight of that receding forehead, protruding eyebrows, iron hard jaws and sharply pointed ears.

“Couldn’t—couldn’t you have chosen a better looking pupil?” she ventured, voice trembling. “He’s giving me the jitters.”

“As long as I’ve got this flame gun we’re safe enough. . . .”

Arch held out his hand slowly, then snatched it back as the brute’s huge teeth bared in petulant anger. . . . Then suddenly it raised a hand to its little forehead and seemed to give the slightest of shudders. When it lowered the hand the facial appearance had changed again into that of a near-Neanderthal man.

Arch tired of the mutual scrutiny at last, tired of guessing at the workings in the creature’s little brain. He turned, pointed towards the cliff cave, and headed back towards it, glancing ever and again over his shoulder.

“Maybe he’ll follow,” he murmured, and the girl sniffed.

“I don’t fancy being bottled up in a cave with that brute,” she grumbled. “Apart from the fact that he isn’t handsome he might make the place smell.”

“Will you get it through your thick head that he’ll one day be a man of supreme and far reaching intelligence?” Arch snapped. “At the rate he changes at he’ll be equal with you and me at the end of a few days. Besides he’ll be darned helpful to us. He owes us a debt, don’t forget. We saved his life.”

She glanced back nervously. “Well, he’s following us anyhow,” she said worriedly. “Suppose—suppose we stop outside the cave? Maybe it’ll be safer.”

Arch nodded assent and once they gained the cave he stood ready and waiting until the brute came up. There was something incredible and baffling about the mad evolution of the creature. The sub-human effect had changed again: the creature had lost the power of operating the nodules of its simian-pointed ears. At terrific speed he was developing into an intelligent man.

Finally he came level, looking in almost childlike wonderment at his outspread fingers. Between them reposed the vestigial remains of his saurian origin. In thirty seconds they had become natural fingers, but thickly stubbed.

“We’re trying to help you,” Arch said presently, making dumb motions. “We want you for a friend.”

The brute looked up; a faint flash of wisdom crossed his apish face and then disappeared. His only response was a deep, chesty grunt, then he sat down heavily right across the cave entrance as though to wait.

“No dice,” Arch growled. “He *would* choose that place to squat. Guess we’ll have to wait until he gets more intelligent.”

Elsie, her fears abating somewhat at the evidence of the creature’s docility, relinquished her hold and squatted down too. Within a few minutes the Sun westered over the fantastic forest and sank at lightning speed.

The brute slept during the two-hour night, watched ceaselessly by the chilled and wondering Earthlings. . . . When the Sun rose again the creature was no longer an ape but a naked man quite on a par with a modern earth being.

The moment he woke up and beheld the two shiveringly watching him he leapt lithely to his feet and sped at a terrific speed into the distance—not towards a forest but towards an area now sprouting with rudely designed huts and abodes.

The age of the wild had passed.

“Pity he dashed off like that,” was Elsie’s comment, as she rose stiffly and rubbed her chilled bare arms. “Maybe he got self conscious at finding himself a nudist. If he was as cold as I am I’m not surprised.”

“The cold is our growing distance from the Sun,” Arch said. “As to our friend, you’ve said something a darn sight more accurate than most of your observations. The need for clothing, in his now advanced mind, will be a strong urge. Bet you a dollar he turns up again!”

“Check!” the girl said, and after diving into the cave for the provision bag she settled herself to eat and wait again, grateful for the Sun, smaller though it undoubtedly was.

For an hour there was no sign of the ape-cum-man. The only changes lay in the queer city. With every passing moment it changed indescribably. Illusory flutterings constantly rippled over it. In fifteen minutes the crude dwellings were normal edifices; the first ramifications of a city were coming into being.

“Do you think that city builds itself or is it actually erected by the labor of unseen creatures?” Elsie asked at last, her blue eyes utterly perplexed. “It isn’t even reasonable to suppose that any beings could work at such a frantic rate and with progression of ideas.”

“Don’t forget that this planet is in top gear,” Arch murmured. “Think back on the terrific speed at which everything has moved—or at least it’s looked that way to our senses. Remember the speed of the earlier metamorphoses, the whirling rate of that ape fight—the way our naked friend streaked off like lightning with the lid off. Because earthly evolution and movement is so slow it doesn’t imply that the same thing must exist everywhere else. This chameleon planet has to cash in on the fruits of an entire existence in the equivalent of a mere earthly fortnight. That means that the inhabitants work in like ratio—don’t even waste time on dying. Just grow right up from beginning to end. Their buildings appear like blurs because of the rate they move at. The further on evolution and intelligence travel the faster everything will go, I expect. Increasing knowledge and modernity makes for increasing speed. What

really interests me is where it is all going to end. Maybe Almega will be able to tell us if he comes back.”

“Almega?” Elsie asked in surprise, frowning.

“Sure—Alpha and Omega cut short. Suits him, don’t you think?”

“Not bad—for you,” she admitted slyly; then before she could speak further there came a streak of dust from tumult of the city.

Out of the Sunshine there suddenly merged the figure of Almega himself, half smiling, now a complete man of an ultra-modern age.

A one-piece garment, blue in color and elastic in texture—specially designed to accommodate the constant changes of his figure—covered him from heels to neck.

Arch jumped in surprise.

“We’re friends,” he began again. “I tried to tell you—”

“I know, when I was in primordial form,” Almega interjected briefly. “My brain was not then developed to its present stage.”

Arch gazed in amazement. “Say, how come you talk my language?”

“Thought waves,” said Almega briefly. “I have not much time to speak. I am so fast and you are so slow. Listen to me. I speak under effort. Forced to go slow. Very slow.”

“Shoot!” Arch invited.

Almega hesitated for a moment, then said, “Our evolution is very rapid. Soon I shall be a superman. Then on to other states. Come to thank you for saving me. My brain was then only 430 grams. Now it is 1,350 grams. Soon it will be 2,000 grams. . . .”

He stopped again, visibly changing. His forehead, already massive, was commencing to bulge strangely. His body changed form swiftly, becoming thinner and smaller than before.

“Your space ship was not destroyed. Lies in a straight line that way, some distance off.” He pointed the exact direction and Arch checked it minutely on his wrist compass. “Reach it as soon as you can. This world will pass shortly to remote aphelion. Cold will completely destroy you but we shall adapt ourselves.”

“Am I right in believing that time is far swifter here than it is to us?” Arch questioned eagerly.

The swelling head nodded swiftly. “Quite right. Our evolution is encompassed in one circling of the Sun—we go from beginning to end without dying and leave cellular spores at the end of our course, to start again at perihelion. Our climate too pursues the same changes, though of course it is an inactive state. Rain and sun here are so swift to you you will hardly see the difference, save in the long disaster at the erratic point of this planet’s orbit, which you have already experienced. We look like you because of similar conditions.”

“When you’ve run this course of mankind, then, your world will be empty?” Elsie asked interestedly.

“No; man’s stage only represents one dominion. Be same on your world in the future. My brain is better now. I see your world is very far away. No matter. Man on any planet is only one form of dominion. Before that stage we were the masters in other forms. Just as there have been former types, so there will be later types. Incessant change. Shortly I shall lose sense of smell and develop spectroscopic eyes and ears. I shall read the light-symphonies of Nature; I shall hear the pulsations of the universe. My teeth will disappear, so will my hair. My eyes’ visual range will change as this world speeds further away from the Sun and becomes embraced in twilight. As the dark deepens I shall see in that, too.”

“Then?” Arch asked, thinking of a possible earthly parallel.

“Ears will disappear,” said Almega dispassionately. “We shall conquer all things as Man—so swiftly you will not see it. We shall conquer space and the universe. To you a mere blur. Evolution will go on. . . .”

He changed again. His eyes glistened queerly: his body went even thinner. But with hardly an alteration in his clipped voice he went on,

“I can think better now. We shall become insects. So it will happen with your world. Already your insects are adapted for future control. Particularly your *cephenomia* fly. It is the fastest flier on your planet. So will we be. We shall war with termites, gain brief mastery and change again. By then—to you mere days—our planet will have moved very far from the Sun. It will be cold. We shall change into wormlike beings—*echinodermata*, as you call them. We shall go further than that; move into the state from which we came—a single cell. In that wise, still intelligent, we shall live through into the ultimate night of our world at aphelion. The cell will remain, to be born again at perihelion and repeat the life-cycle.”

“A single cell!” cried Arch in amazement.

“Yes,” Almega said, changing again into something that was all head and penetrating, thought-battering eyes. “You had a similar thing on your world in the alluvian epoch. You called it *Caulerpa*. It looked like green algae, had a fernish body and grew to four feet in height. All in one cell.”

“He’s right there!” Elsie exclaimed. “I’ve heard of it.”

“And the purpose behind this astounding evolution of yours?” Arch demanded. “You live through all your stages and work back to a single cell, then you do it all again. Why?”

“Why is anything?” Almega asked surprisingly. “My race and I will not come again. When our intelligence passes at the planet’s aphelion we shall go elsewhere, leaving behind only a cell which, at perihelion, will sprout again. But with another mind. Where our own minds go we do not know. Like you, we do not understand the riddle of death.”

He turned with sudden swiftness and glanced at the westering Sun. “An epoch has gone!” he said anxiously. “You go—keep safe. Thank you. . . .”

And the space where he stood was suddenly empty. Only a line of settling dust sweeping down to the crazy, changing city revealed the magically fast path he had taken.

“Can that guy move!” Arch whistled. “He could play badminton with himself and sleep between serves. . . .” Then he sobered a little and glanced at the girl. “Well, you heard what he said. Guess we’d better be moving, Mrs. Lakington.”

“It is a bit chilly at that,” she agreed. “Now we know all about it from our sentence-stilted friend we might as well go.”

They shouldered their packs again, cast a last look at the cave, then as they moved away from it darkness returned to chameleon planet.

That night of all others was painted with sights unique in their experience of planet exploration. As they moved sharply in the direction Almega had indicated—apparently due south by Arch’s wrist compass—they beheld the transformation of the city in all its weird, incredible glory.

The scene presented was that of a blur of lights as buildings supplanted buildings, as the air machines of a now far reaching science streaked the blackness. Sound, deep-pitched and

vibrant, floated across the intervening space like the droning of a super beehive. It was hard to imagine that in that enormity of power and mutation a race was passing literal epochs.

The two only stopped twice during the night to rest. When the dawn came the city was behind them, momentarily still in its wild upbuilding. The chill wind of that dawn, the paling light of the increasingly distant Sun, both embraced a city that had come to a stop, the ingenuity of architecture evidently at last played out. A row of tall, slender buildings reaching to the sky, atop which there stood complicated towers and the various devices of a far advanced science, stood in mute testimony to the slow passing of a race that had reached its mightiest thoughts—in man form at least—in two short hours of apparent night!

“Don’t you think it’s time we wrapped ourselves up a bit?” Elsie asked at length, rubbing her arms vigorously. “It’s getting freezing cold. The air’s thinning a bit, too. No telling yet how far we may have to go.”

The night shut down like a breath from the void, sending them stumbling onwards with a slowly rising terror—the monstrous fear of unknown forces reaching out of that great and ebon dark. Afraid to stop, they kept on going.

The dawn was the strangest they had seen. The Sun was as red and cold as a super-Arctic, so vast was his distance. Its long, slanting red wavelengths fell upon a forest directly ahead.

“Is—*is* it a forest?” asked Elsie uncertainly through the helmet phones, stopping wearily. “I thought all life had gone for good.”

They moved more slowly now, both from fatigue and the cumbersome folds of their space suits. In five minutes they gained the forest and passed into its slowly changing midst. It was so far the slowest and yet the most astounding place they had witnessed. A woodland of gray, frosty shapes, sheerly beautiful, deeply red lit. The life that tenanted it, harmless apparently, moved with a certain slowness . . . but *what* life!

Enormous reeds were gliding along through the thinning air like decapitated serpents, twisting and writhing, unutterably grotesque. In another direction bristling gray footballs were rolling swiftly along in search of hidden prey, propelled after the manner of an earthly polypus by whiplike tentacles.

As the Earthlings passed wonderingly through their midst, staring incredulously at the infinitely diversified forms, one or other of the strange objects burst suddenly apart and became two—bipartition of cells.

“Unicellular life of the *n*th degree,” Arch breathed, fascinated.

“I’d sooner see a space ship than a whole lot of cells.” Elsie sighed. “How much further, I wonder?”

They went on slowly through the very midst of the balls and rods, through the thickest part of the lacy, cellular trees, until at length they were through it. Behind them, the forest began to disappear. . . . Gigantic bacteria, the toughest, most adaptable things in life, were beginning the final dominion before the utter extinction of death itself.

Ahead there stretched a desert of ice. Nothing was stirring in that redly lit bitterness: no new form of life was manifesting under the sheathed armor of what had once been land and water. Chameleon Planet was on the verge of death.

Elsie stopped suddenly and gripped Arch’s inflated arm.

“Suppose we never find the ship?” she asked almost hysterically. “Do you realize what it means? This world is finished—and so will we be if something doesn’t—”

She broke off. The Sun, slanting swiftly down to the horizon, suddenly set something gleaming brightly not half a mile distant—a pointed spire in the ice field. She jerked forward so quickly that she nearly broke the helmet phone cord.

“What the hell—!” Arch gasped, then he pulled up short on the ice as he saw the reason for her wild lunge.

It was the ship! Half of it projecting sharply out of the ice; the rest of it buried in the frozen tomb. Quick as a flash he whipped out his flame gun.

“Still a chance!” he panted. “The door’s shut so the inside will be unharmed. It won’t be crushed, either—the plates are plenty strong enough to resist ice pack. Get busy!”

Without further words they both set to work with their twin flame guns.

Tearing off his pack, Arch dived, perfectly protected by his space suit. He used his flame gun constantly to keep the ice from reforming and crushing him to death. . . . To spin the external screws of the airlock was a matter of moments. His shout of triumph traveled into the girl’s helmet phones as she too came floating through the narrow tunnel.

By degrees, working like divers, they shut the three safety compartment doors one after the other and finally gained the grateful interior of the control room.

Still space-suited, Arch gave the power to the rocket tubes. The exhaust blasted ice and water in a vast shower.

Half an hour later the two looked out into the void—but Chameleon Planet was out of sight.

[The end of *Chameleon Planet* by John Russell Fearn (as Polton Cross)]