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# WONDER Stories

HUGO GERNSBACK  
Editor



March

Other Science Stories  
In This Issue

"DWELLER IN MARTIAN DEPTHS"

by Clark Ashton Smith

"WANDERERS OF TIME"

by John Beynon Harris

"THE MAN WHO AWOKE"

by Laurence Manning

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*(Illustration by Paul)*

One of the Numen was clawing wildly at his body. Beside him lay the remnants of the machine from which a glistening black tide of life was flowing.

# WANDERERS OF TIME

By

JOHN WYNDHAM

Writing under the pseudonym John Beynon Harris.

First published *Wonder Stories*, March 1933.

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*Many people, discussing the future of the earth, assume without thinking that man will always be the dominant creature. Yet we know that man was once a grovelling, fearful and unimportant animal in the order of nature. There is no good reason why he should not again be relegated to an inferior position among earth's creatures, or disappear entirely from the face of the globe.*

*If that occurs, what order of life will reign supreme? Or will it come about that there will be a desperate struggle for existence among the remaining species with eventually the extinction of all life—except bacteria?*

*Mr. Harris has some very definite ideas on this subject, and in this engrossing story he takes us into the future some thousands of years to show us the end of all of our hopes, our ambitions and our scientific and technocratic planning.*

The pompous little man who strutting his way through a wood near the Saber property, blinked rapidly and dropped his lower jaw. For perhaps five seconds he stared before him with an expression of fish-like astonishment, then a fear of the inexplicable, inherited from far-off ancestors, sent him scuttling for cover. Once in the safe obscurity of the bushes, he turned again to goggle amazedly at the center of the glade. His surprise was excusable and his panic understandable.

A moment before, he had faced a small clearing holding in itself nothing more substantial than golden sunlight. Then, even as he looked—he was certain he had neither blinked nor turned his head—a glittering cylinder had appeared. And it stayed there, in the exact middle of the open space, looking like an immense projectile of polished steel. An apparition sudden and alarming enough to make the little man feel entirely justified in running. Now, from his vantage point, he examined it with less panic and a rising indignation.

The cylinder's length he estimated at somewhere about eighteen feet, and its diameter at three feet. The metal covering appeared at this range to be seamless and it scintillated in the afternoon sunshine with a harsh brightness.

"Not quite like steel," he corrected himself. "Colder, more like chromium plate. But what the devil is it . . .?"

The discretion of remaining among the bushes appealed to him far more than the valor of a closer inspection. A large object like this, which could appear abruptly and in complete silence before one's very nose, was to be treated with circumspection. Less than half a minute later, he snatched a sudden breath. A rectangular patch of darkness had become visible in the upper surface of the machine—if machine it was.

Fascinatedly, he watched the slit broaden as a panel was slid back. A man's head was thrust cautiously through the opening, turning to left and right as he reconnoitered. Presently,

seemingly satisfied that he was unobserved, he slid the panel back to its limit and levered himself out of the opening.

A glance at the man's full face brought a short gasp from the watcher and he moved involuntarily, snapping a branch beneath his foot. For a moment he held his breath, but he became easier when the other showed no sign of having heard the sharp crack. He had turned back to his machine, and with one arm plunged into the dark interior, was fumbling for something. When he straightened again, the other stiffened, for the right hand held a ponderous revolver which pointed in his direction. Any hope that this might be accidental, was quickly dispersed.

"Come on," commanded the man in the glade. "Out of that, quick."

He flourished his weapon impatiently at the watcher's momentary hesitation.

"Put 'em up, and come out," he said.

The man in the bushes waited no longer. Hands well above his head, he marched into the open.

"Who are you?" asked the other.

"Henry Q. Jones," the watcher answered. He was finding himself less afraid of the man before him than he had been of the impersonal cylinder. He even added:

"Who are you, if it comes to that?"

"My name is no business of yours," replied the other, watching him closely, "but it happens to be Roy Saber."

Henry Q. Jones' mouth started to open and then shut quickly.

"You don't believe me?"

Henry Q. grunted non-committally.

"Why not?"

"Well, if you must know, for one thing Roy Saber is younger than you are—though you're mighty like him—and, another thing, I happened to see Roy Saber board the Chicago train a couple of hours ago."

"Awkward," commented the other. "Nevertheless, I am Roy Saber." He contemplated his captive for a moment.

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Henry Q. Jones returned the scrutiny with curiosity. The other's clothes differed greatly from his captive's propriety of dress. His suit was of an unusually bright blue and though the pants were full in cut, the jacket fitted closely; moreover, though it gave a double-breasted effect, the front flap was in reality carried right across to the left side and secured by a zip fastener. The broad lapel was of a slightly lighter shade of blue and stretched like a triangular slash from the right shoulder to its apex on the left of the waist. The neck opening showed a soft collar with surprisingly long points and a tie striped with the two blues of the suit.

"Well, Henry Q.," he said at length. "I've nothing against you personally except that you are a damned nuisance, but I'll have to tie you up or you might ditch the whole plan."

Roy Saber was inexpert at trussing. He used more rope than necessary and his knots were the jumbles of the amateur, nevertheless he contrived to reduce the other to a state of log-like immobility. Then he produced a handkerchief and carefully began to roll it diagonally.

"I'm sorry, but I can't afford to have you bawling for help.—Open!"

Henry Q.'s mouth remained obstinately shut. He received a painful jab in the ribs.

"Open!"

He opened.

Roy turned back to the cylinder and carefully shut the entrance panel. Then he thrust the big revolver into a pocket, and picked up the bound man. At the edge of the clearing, he laid him down among the concealing bushes.

"I'll only be about a couple of hours," he remarked considerately.

Henry Q. twisted his head and glared balefully after him as he disappeared between the tree trunks.

Roy Saber was back in something under the two hours, and he did not return alone. By his side walked a girl whose fair hair shimmered in the shafts of sunlight which penetrated the foliage. Her face was fresh colored and her chin was rounded, but firm. With her blue eyes and her impertinent nose, none could deny her prettiness, but somehow, her mouth, though not too small, failed to suggest an equable disposition. She looked up at Roy with a slightly puzzled frown.

"But Roy," she said, "you seem to look much older. Your hair's not all black—I'm sure I can see grey streaks here and there. And you're wearing such funny clothes. What's happened?"

"I am older, Betty, but there's no time to explain just now. You must wait a bit."

He looked admiringly at her, so neat and lithe in her close fitting red frock—a deep red, to contrast with her fairness. They paused beside the clump of bushes where he had hidden Henry Q. As he parted the leaves, Betty heard him mutter under his breath.

"What is it?"

Roy did not answer for a moment. He stared thoughtfully at a few tangled cords which were the only evidence of Henry Q.'s late presence. Then he glanced out at the clearing where the cylinder still lay.

"Wait a minute," he directed, and ran off to one side. He was back in less than the minute.

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"It's all right," he said, leading her into the open. "I thought someone might be laying for me behind the machine." He thought for a moment. "I'd meant to talk to you a bit before we risked anything, but this changes it. We'll have to hurry."

"I don't understand—what are you talking about?"

"I'll explain it all later," he said as he hastened her towards the cylinder. He drew the revolver from his pocket and she looked at it askance.

"What——?"

"Later," he said, busily sliding back two panels in the curved surface. He pointed to the end space. "In you get, Betty."

She peered doubtfully at the dark opening. It was possible to see that the whole of the interior was thickly padded and supplied with loose cushions.

"But——"

"Quick, quick," he insisted, lifting her and helping her through the space. He slid the cover over her. Even as it clicked into place he heard a crackle of running feet among the trees and a voice came bellowing across the clearing:

"Stop where you are. Put 'em up."

Henry Q. Jones had evidently returned with reinforcements. With eel-like agility Roy slid into the cylinder; as he did so, two men in uniform burst from the trees and came pelting over the ground, pistols in hand.

"He's got a gun," called Henry Q.'s voice from somewhere behind them.

Roy had a glimpse of one of the policemen taking aim. Like lightning he ducked and slammed the panel over his head. There came a crash as the bullet struck the cylinder somewhere forward of him. He blanched at the thought of the blob of lead in his delicate machinery, but thanked the Lord it had hit the forward compartment and not the rear where Betty lay. In frenzied haste he twisted the dials on his small control panel, and snapped in the minor switches.

The police had reached the cylinder now. They were battering on it with their pistol butts and he could hear their voices raised in a muffled shouting. With a desperate hope that the shot had injured no vital part, Roy wrenched over the main switch.

Outside, two bewildered policemen stared open-mouthed at one another. Even while they hammered on its walls, the cylinder had vanished without trace.

“Well I’ll be——,” one muttered.

The other said nothing; he looked badly scared. Henry Q. Jones emerged from the safety of the trees.

“And you call yourselves cops,” he sneered unpleasantly.

## CHAPTER II

### Effect of a Bullet

Roy's biggest surprise when he had made his first journey in the cylindrical machine had been the entire absence of sensation. He had closed the sliding lid and shut out the view of his workroom. Then he had pulled the switch and waited tensely for something to happen. Apparently nothing did, and he had started to reopen the panel with the conviction that the experiment had miscarried and that further adjustment would be necessary.

He had gasped to find that after all the contrivance had worked perfectly—had, in fact, moved him back ten years in time, without changing his position on earth. It was the more surprising in the face of the witnesses' prophecies of utter failure. Sam Hanson, his attorney had protested:

"It's ridiculous, Roy—impossible! Why, if you did go back ten years, you would have to be in two places at one time—you might even meet yourself. It would mean entire confusion. Just think of the disorganization that success would imply. There'd be neither past nor future any more."

Roy shook his head.

"I shan't meet my younger self—I should remember it now if that meeting had ever occurred. And as for being in two places at one time, well, why not? Has anyone ever proved it impossible? It is just a ridiculous assertion made by persons completely ignorant of the nature of time. Anyway, I'm going to try."

And he had succeeded.

Succeeded not only in traveling, but also in his main purpose which was the finding of Betty. Now he was carrying her home in triumph. He had meant to put the plan before her first, but the intrusion of Henry Q. Jones had upset that. It would be good to see the amazed faces in his workroom when they both climbed out of the machine.

For a second after he had pulled the switch, nothing happened. Then there came a jolt. The cylinder swayed as though poised uncertainly. Further and further over it leaned until it tilted violently over to the right, rolling him up the padded side of his compartment. As it twisted, he wondered what could have happened; after that, he became too busy to speculate. The cylinder was bumping unevenly and turning with increasing speed. Grimly he drove his elbows and knees into the padding in an effort to wedge his body instead of having it bounced around like a ball. The forward end brought up against some obstruction with a crash. The machine slewed violently and the bump with which Roy's head met the end of the compartment was but little softened by the padding.

He thought with anguish of the havoc that crash must have caused amid the mechanism. He stretched one hand up towards the sliding panel. The movement, small as it was, served to upset the precarious balance. Again the cylinder canted over and recommenced its jolting progress, spinning and bouncing like a runaway barrel as it went.

After long drawn minutes, it slowed and rolled jerkily to a stop. Roy moved cautiously to assure himself that, this time, it was stable. It was, but he made a disconcerting discovery.

"Betty," he shouted.

"Yes," her voice came faintly through the partition between their compartments.

"Are you all right?"



The reply was unintelligible.

“We’re upside down,” he continued, “and I can’t open the panel. When I call three, throw yourself against the right side and we may be able to roll on half a turn.” He paused, then:

“One—two—three.”

The cylinder lurched a little, hovered, and then settled back.

“Try again.”

The second attempt met with no more success than the first. Roy wiped his brow; it was getting very warm in the cramped quarters.

“Something in the way,” he called. “Better try swinging her from side to side and see if we can roll over it.”

They struggled for over a minute, but very little movement was possible. There appeared to be obstructions on both sides, and Roy began to fear that his time traveler would prove a double coffin.

“Once more,” he yelled.

Still the cylinder refused to surmount the obstacles. Roy lay back, sweating and exhausted, puzzling to find a way out of the situation. Once he thought he heard a movement outside, but decided that it must be the girl stirring.

“Betty,” he shouted again.

As though in answer, there came three deliberate taps on the outer wall.

“Betty, there’s somebody outside. Let’s try again. One—two—three.”

---

He threw every ounce of his weight against the side. Hesitantly the cylinder rolled, this time, until the ports came uppermost. For a second it hung poised, and then came a clank against the side, just in time to stop it from settling back.

Swiftly Roy reached up and slid back his panel to admit a welcome gust of fresh air. Sitting up, he thrust out his head and looked back to see that Betty’s panel also was open. Her dishevelled head appeared, but she gazed beyond, rather than at him. He spun round and stared in astonishment at the figure which stood by the battered fore-part of the cylinder. His surprise was reciprocated, and for some seconds, the two faced one another in silence.

Roy felt a shock at the sight of the man before him. He stood barely four feet in height, and his body, hands and feet were in good proportion to that size. But his totally bald head was of normal dimensions—perhaps a trifle larger—and gave an odd effect of being insecurely balanced on his small frame. His visible clothing consisted of a single silvery garment designed on the lines of a smock, but caught around his waist by a broad leather belt to which a number of dangling objects were hooked.

He approached them as they climbed out of the cylinder. Betty shrank back, an expression of disgust on her face. Roy pulled himself together.

“You speak English?” he inquired.

“English is my language,” the other replied, his accent differing but little from Roy’s own. He continued to regard the two with a puzzled air.

“Then we have you to thank for our rescue—I am Roy Saber, and this lady is Miss Betty Mordan.”

“And I,” returned the little man, “am Del Two-Forty-A.”

In the ensuing pause Roy became aware of the unexpected aspect of the countryside. A large red sun was pouring down from the cloudless sky to show, not the fertile land he had left, but a tumbled scene of sand and rock. Nowhere was it relieved by a single soothing patch

of green, and over all hung the deathly silence of desolation. They stood in a steep sided valley whose floor was dotted with fallen masses of rock and banked in many parts with drifts of sand. An unhurried river ran twisting past them, disappearing where the curve of the valley cut off their view, a mile away. There was inexpressible dreariness in the barren vista. Roy glanced up at the hillside behind them.

"It's a miracle we weren't smashed in rolling down there," he murmured.

"It certainly is," replied Betty's voice harshly. "And no credit to you, either. Now suppose you get us back—and quick. I'd like to know just what sort of a game you think you're playing with me?"

Roy stared at her and then recovered himself. After all, there was some excuse for her tone.

"Something went wrong," he began, "that cop——"

"Oh, yes. 'Something went wrong' did it? Well, it's your job to see that it darned well goes right again.—Say, do you realize that this is abduction?"

Roy spread his hands helplessly, looking ruefully at his ruined time-traveler.

"I can't make that work again. When the cop fired into the machinery, he jammed something. And now that roll down here's smashed the thing right up."

The dwarf had been peering interestedly into the wreckage of the fore-part, prying among the tangled wiring and examining the remains of shattered vacuum tubes. Still looking perplexed, he turned to Roy again.

"What is your date?" he asked.

Roy suffered another surprise. He had not expected the immediate recognition of his time traveler for what it was.

"I'm from 1951," he replied.

"1941," Betty corrected. "What's wrong with your memory?"

"No, 1951. I'll explain later."

"So early? That is remarkable," said the little man, indicating the cylinder. "My own date is 10,402."

"Say, what is all this about?" Betty demanded.

"It seems to mean that the cop's shot has landed us in the year 10,402."

Betty's regard was scornful and scathing.

"Suppose," she suggested, "you quit the kidding. I'm in no mood for it—what's more, the sooner you get us back home, the better it's going to be for you. Get me?"

---

Roy stared at her. Her menacing tone of voice shocked him. He felt bewildered, as though the girl he knew had suddenly turned into a stranger. In his surprise he had forgotten Del who broke in as he turned:

"You are mistaken. I meant to say only that I started from the year 10,402. What this year is, I do not know—save that it is many millennia later."

"That's right," said Betty. "You must keep the joke up. But I'm not laughing—I can't see that you're both so damned funny as you think you are."

A plaintive expression passed over Del's face.

"What does she mean?" he inquired.

Roy changed the subject. Turning to the dwarf:

"Why did you come to this year?" he asked.

Del shook his head. “Something was wrong with my machine—just as something was wrong with yours. It is over there.” He pointed to a large boulder some twenty yards away. The end of a bright metal bar protruded from behind it.

“Is it smashed too?”

“Only a little injured.”

“Let’s go and look at it.”

Before they left the cylinder, Roy groped in the control compartment and produced his revolver. He stuffed a handful of cartridges into each side pocket and they moved off. Betty followed sulkily.

Del’s machine bore no resemblance to his own. The impression it gave was of a cubical cage with six foot sides and built of an intricate criss-cross strutting of two metals, one silvery, and the other, black. A padded bucket seat was set in the middle with a small control board before it. The driving mechanism was evidently contained in three black boxes clamped to the base framework and inter-connected by heavy cables. Roy’s heart sank as he saw it. An idea that parts of his own cylinder might be used to render Del’s machine workable, was roughly quashed. The two contrivances had nothing constructionally in common.

Del mutely pointed to one base corner where the framework was wrenched and sadly twisted. It was also noticeable that the cover of one of the black boxes was split open. Roy leaned over to examine the damage more closely.

“You see,” Del began, “unlike your machine, this works by the capillary absorption of light. The rays striking—”

“Look, look!” cried Betty, behind them. They wheeled to find her pointing up at the skyline of the opposite hill. A row of strange objects was progressing in single file. There was nothing to give them scale, and Roy was able to estimate their height only very roughly in the neighborhood of twenty feet. Each consisted of an egg-shaped main bulk balanced upon two trellised supports, tapering towards the ground. These “legs” were jointed in the middle, and, like the “body” above, were colored a bright red. Around the main upper bulk, complexities of levers were folded.

For some seconds, the three stood motionless and staring.

“What——?” Roy began, but Del shook his head before the question was formed. There had been nothing like these in his century.

From the leader of the five red contrivances a jointed arm suddenly swept to the ground and caught up a rock. Without pausing in its stride, it sent the mass, fully half a ton in weight, sailing across the valley. Somewhere on the hill behind them it landed with a crash and a clatter of metal. Roy abruptly dragged his companions into the shadow of the nearest bolder, fearful that discovery might bring a rock hurtling in their direction.

The red machines strode on their way with unhurried, stilted gait, a faint metallic clanking accompanying their movements. Apparently the rock had accomplished its purpose—whatever that might be—at any rate, no more followed, and the metal arm was refolded against the egg-shaped body-piece. The three watched in silence as the five red figures carried themselves away in long, stiff strides. Even Betty’s indignation had momentarily given way to nervousness.

“What were they?” she demanded.

Roy shrugged his shoulders. Speculation was worse than useless. He stood up to assure himself that the machines were truly out of sight. As he rose, there came a clatter of metal against stone, a sound rapidly approaching up the valley. His hand snatched at his revolver.

## CHAPTER III

### The Machines

A group of machines came abruptly round the masking turn of the valley. Contrary to Roy's expectations, they bore little similarity to the rock-hurling monsters of the hill-top. Only the shape of the body pieces was similar. They stood some seven feet to the highest point of the rounded back, and their egg-shaped hulls progressed with a scurrying motion upon six jointed legs. Four waving metal tentacles protruded from the extreme front and, above them, two lenses were set flush in the smooth casework.

They stopped at the sight of Roy, with the suddenness of complete surprise, and stood motionless save for their waving tentacles. He called in a low tone to the others to remain hidden and stepped forward, revolver in hand. An indecisive movement ran through the ranks of the machines. They seemed on the point of retreat, but at that moment, Betty, ignoring Roy's advice, chose to emerge from behind the rock.

The machines moved as one, and came scuttering forward with a great waving of tentacles. Three shots from Roy's revolver crashed among them with no visible result. He turned to become aware that Del was now out of concealment, fumbling with a tube which looked like a flashlight.

"Run," Roy snapped. "Get to the river."

He had some faint hope that the machines might not be watertight. Betty was already fleeing and Del turned to follow her. Roy stayed long enough to send another three shots, and then started to run with the machines almost upon him. He made no more than a dozen yards before something fouled his ankle and flung him heavily to earth. As the machines overtook him, he saw Del turn and raise his tube. Two tentacles of the nearest pursuer fell to the ground as though they had been chopped off. Del switched the tube at another, but now there were a half dozen of the machines bearing down on him.

One more tentacle fell, then, like a silver whiplash, another struck the tube from his hand and wrapped itself around him. The tube sailed high through the air and fell with a splash into the river. A fountain of steam, like the jetting plume of a geyser, roared into the sky, while the water all around broke, seething and bubbling. Betty, almost at the brink, recoiled. The feeler of a pursuing machine snatched at her, tearing away her red frock. It tossed the garment away, wrapped like a shining belt about her waist, and carried her back towards Roy and Del.

With relief Roy saw that no injury seemed intended towards any of the party. Each of them was carefully picked up in a wrapping of tentacles, and the machines set off down the valley in the direction from which they had appeared.

For five miles they followed the tortuous river course, then the hills were left behind and they came out upon a level plain where patches of coarse grass, half choked by drifting sand, struggled hardily to grow. The machines changed their formation as they reached the open country and Roy found that Del's captor was traveling alongside his own, while Betty's was some yards in advance. He spoke across to Del and received assurance that he was uninjured.

"The most unfortunate thing is that my tube is lost," the dwarf added.

"What was it? I've never seen anything like that before."

"A heat ray. You did not have such things in the twentieth century?"

Roy shook his head and went on to talk about their captors. On this subject, both were equally at a loss.

“Robots? Distant control mechanisms? They might be either,” Del suggested.

“Or, perhaps, vehicles,” added Roy. “The bodies of the race may have atrophied into complete uselessness and made these machines necessary for carrying the brains.”

Del considered the theory an unlikely one.

“But they certainly have a high level of intelligence. No doubt you noticed that they are bringing along our wrecked machines?”

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Roy, glancing back past the curving metal flank of his captor, could see his battered cylinder supported by the tentacles of two following machines.

Betty had caught the sound of their voices. She called back querulously to know why Roy did not do something. The indignity of capture had done nothing to soothe her temper and, now that no immediate danger threatened, her tone had resumed its nagging quality. After a devastating flow of abuse, Del inquired curiously:

“Is she hurt?”

“Yes, she’s hurt, but not in the way you mean. She’s been pinked in her pride. She was riled to begin with. Now she’s lost her dress and is being carried over a desert in her underclothes—she’s hurt, all right.”

Del looked surprised at Roy’s tone. He was silent for some moments before he suggested:

“I wonder whether that red dress had anything to do with the attack? It was at her appearance that the machines went into action, and when the dress was torn away, they became much calmer. Also, the first machines we saw were colored red. . . .”

No reply came from Roy. He seemed uninterested in the suggestion. Del relapsed into a contemplative silence.

During their advance the country was losing severity. The hard, wiry grass gradually became supplanted by a softer type, growing more luxuriantly and almost hiding the sandy soil. A dotting of infrequent, stunted shrubs managed to find sustenance. In the distance a line of darker green suggested the presence of trees.

“Thank God for that,” Roy said. “I had begun to fear that the world might be all desert.”

“I think we’re headed for that,” said Del. He nodded ahead towards a vast spike which stabbed up into the heavens.

Roy looked at it. The base was hidden among the trees many miles away, but even at this distance he could tell that its height must be measured in thousands of feet. Observation at such a distance gave no clue to its nature save that it was too isolated and too abrupt to be a natural formation. Yet it was roughly shaped, lacking the symmetry and lines of a normal artificial structure. Its vastness induced a sense of importance and a feeling of fatalism, and he watched it with rising disquiet until the great red sun died in a livid blaze.

The machines did not hesitate. They held on their way through a mysterious dark world in which the only sound was the scuttering of their own progress.

Throughout the night they pursued a winding way among the trees, still bearing in the direction of the mighty spire. The darkness appeared to have little or no hampering effect upon the machines, and dawn found them with but few miles left to cover. It was with a very weary thankfulness that the captives were carried clear of the forest into the open space surrounding the base of the artificial mountain. They were not only fatigued, but hungry and thirsty, and oppressed by the impossibility of making their wants known.

The mass of the building at short range was stupendous and overwhelming, rearing before them like an ill smoothed cliff and dwarfing them into a feeling of helplessness. One high, arched entrance pierced it at ground level, and through this they were borne into ever increasing gloom.

For five minutes they traveled through pitch black corridors filled with the scuttering sounds of many mobile machines; then their captors came to a stop for the first time since they had left the rocky valley. There came a click, followed by a rattle as a door of sheet metal slid up into the roof. Beyond it was revealed a dimly lit, cave-like hall. The binding tentacles loosened to set the three on their feet. Gentle thrusts sent them staggering stiffly forward. The metal door clattered down behind them.

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For a moment they stood silently gazing about them. The meager light emanated from a group of translucent balls placed in the middle of the floor and served to show imperfectly the rear end of the hall. Of the other end, beyond the lights, nothing could be seen but a velvety darkness. Roy took a step forward and then stopped abruptly at the sound of something moving in the shadows. He drew his revolver and pointed it menacingly as he continued his advance. Two figures came dimly into view, rounding the clustered light balls.

“Stop,” Roy ordered.

He turned to speak to Del, but the little man brushed him aside and rushed excitedly forward, calling to the two figures. Roy, with Betty beside him, was left to look on wonderingly as the three greeted one another. He could see now that the strangers were similar to Del both in stature and clothing. A few moments later they were led up and introduced. They regarded Roy and Betty with the same curiosity as Del had shown at the first meeting, and evinced the same incredulous surprise at hearing of their twentieth century origin. Del explained:

“These are my friends Kal Two Eleven A and Ril Three Thirty-Two A. They were both of them my assistants,” he added.

Roy’s wonderment grew.

“Then you are also from 10,402?” he asked.

The dwarfed Kal shook his large head.

“No, we are from 10,424. It took us over twenty years to duplicate the time traveling machine.”

“But you know what date we have reached now?”

Again Kal shook his head.

“We have no more means of discovering than you have. One can only guess——”

The clatter of the metal door cut short his speculation. The group spun round to see three more human beings urged gently into the hall. There was a fleeting look of alarm on the face of the tallest of the newcomers. As the sheet rattled down behind them, he produced a black tube and advanced, holding it trained upon them.

“Who are you?” he demanded in a firm tone. “And by what right have you made us prisoners?”

Roy looked the man over. He stood perhaps six feet and was built with slender strength, in excellent proportions. His hair, though fine and sparse, was jet black as were the eyebrows which ran in a single frowning bar across his forehead. His jaw was square, his mouth, thin-lipped and firm and his eyes, keen. The strength of character which he showed seemed out of accord with the soft silk (or synthetic silk) garments which clung in lustrous folds to his

knees. One of his companions was similarly clad. The third newcomer hung back; little more than a shadow in the dim light.

“Who are you, I say?” repeated the speaker.

It was Del who answered. He gave particulars of his own group and countered with a like request. The new arrival put away his tube.

“I am Hale Lorrence, and this is my companion,” he indicated the other silk robed man. “We have come from the year 3920.”

“And the third member of your party?”

The man who called himself Hale, shrugged his shoulders.

“She has told me that her name is Jessica Tree. She claims to have started from 2200 A. D.”

The vaguely seen figure stepped forward. She revealed herself as a girl of perhaps twenty-four or twenty-five. A russet tunic, heavily worked with metallic thread, covered her to her knees. Her legs were a sunburnt brown and her feet were encased in shoes to match her tunic. Black hair, cut short, clustered about her softly oval face, and she surveyed the company from a pair of lustrously dark eyes. Her tone as she spoke betrayed her dislike of Hale’s manner.

“It is more than a mere claim,” she said coldly. “It is a fact that I come from 2200. . . . What year is this?” Del shrugged his shoulders.

“That is what we all want to know.”

“I don’t,” cried Betty’s voice, viciously. “I don’t care a damn what year it is. The one thing I’m certain about is that I have been kidnapped. And if somebody doesn’t do something to get me back where I belong—and do it darned quick, there’s going to be trouble around here. See?”

Hale Lorrence regarded her speculatively for a moment and then turned to Del.

“We are hungry and thirsty. Is there any food here?”

Kal had ascertained that there were dishes of water up the other end of the cavern, but no food.

## CHAPTER IV

### Adrift In Time

After they had drunk, Roy started on an exploratory tour of their prison. He could discover no opening other than that closed by the metal door. The walls would have easily revealed any crack for they were smooth and unornamented. The finish to them puzzled him not a little. Although they were hard and smooth, the effect was not that obtained by any mechanical finishing process. It was, he felt, the kind of result one would expect if a giant hand had attempted to shape the material in its plastic state without the use of tools.

The end of the circuit found him no wiser than the beginning. He returned to find the rest of the party endeavoring to clear away some of their mystification. Del was saying:

“. . . therefore, this must be a kind of dead spot in time. It is as though our machines had been thrown into the flow of time and swept along until, for some unguessable reason, they met an obstruction at this point. Every one of us has arrived here because his machine was faulty in some way or other. To take an illustration—a bad one, I admit, but enough for our purpose—one may consider time as a river. You may turn boats adrift on it at many points, and they will all collect together at the same serious obstacle whether they have traveled a hundred miles or two miles. We are now at some period where the straight flow of time has been checked—perhaps it is even turning back upon itself. We know no details at present, but it is certain that the same curious phenomenon has thrown us all together.”

“But,” Hale objected, “time, like space, surely is curved?”

“It may be—in fact, it must be, but I see no reason why there should not be interruptions in time—after all, are not the stars interruptions in space?”

“You mean that space may interrupt time in the same way that time distorts space?”

“Roughly, yes,—if you can consider the two apart, which I find impossible. I merely repeat that we have struck some barrier and been thrown up like so much jetsam.”

“Then there may be others, besides ourselves?”

“As many others as made faulty time travelers.”

Julian Tyne joined in the conversation. He spoke with a lazy drawl which irritated his listeners.

“But what is all this?” He waved a languid arm. “This place, these queer machines—both the tall red things and the smaller white ones which caught us—what are they all doing? It doesn’t seem to make any sense.”

Del glanced at him.

“Suppose an alien form was plunged into your world of 3920,” he said. “How much do you suppose he would understand? I doubt whether it would ‘make sense’ to him. In fact, I would go so far as to suggest that you would have very little understanding of the organization of my world of 10,402, had your machine taken you there instead of here.”

Roy broke in, dragging the conversation back to the main issue:

“But what do you think these machines are? Slaves of greater intelligences—robots? Or have the machines indeed beaten men as Samuel Butler, at the end of the nineteenth century, feared that they might?”

“I don’t yet pretend to be able to offer any explanation,” Del replied, shaking his head, “but of one thing I am certain, and that is that they are not robots. You notice, for instance, the



irregular finish of this building, both inside and outside. Indisputably, if it had been built by machines, the construction would be mathematically exact. I am convinced that somewhere back of all this we shall find a biologically developed intelligence.”

“And it is up to us,” remarked Hale, “to see that whoever, or whatever, it is, doesn’t get things all his own way. What weapons have we?”

He and Julian Tyne produced black tubes which Del and his companions examined with some amusement. Julian appeared nettled:

“What have you?” he asked.

Kal and Ril showed tubes similar to that which Del had lost in the river. They had come prepared with two each.

“Ten times as powerful as yours,” Del explained, “and for all practical purposes, inexhaustible.”

Roy’s revolver was inspected with much the same mirthful contempt as a catapult would have received. Del made an inventory:

“Four high-power heat tubes; two low-power tubes; one solid bullet projector. Not too bad an armory, though I am sorry that my own heat ray was lost.”

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The clang of the metal door roused the whole party from sleep—though how long they had slept, they could not tell. Roy sprang suddenly to a sitting position. He could see by the dim glow that a number of white metal machines were scuttering towards them. Hale was fumbling for his ray tube.

“No,” said Del’s voice. “Your tube has not enough power to hurt them—besides, we are trapped. They may intend no harm.”

The machines advanced with tentacles extended. Roy felt one wrap firmly around his waist and lift him again into the air. It was in his mind to show fight, but Del had advised against it, and he was coming to have a respect for the dwarf’s judgment. The rest of the party quietly submitted to like treatment and were carried towards the still open door.

For a time they passed through corridors in utter blackness. Again they were aware of movement all around them. The clicking and scraping of invisible machines, orderly and unhurried, as they passed to and fro. At last an arch of daylight showed wanly and minutely ahead. Roy breathed a sigh of relief at the prospect of leaving the oppressive gloom of their strange prison. He was to be disappointed. Forty yards from the passage mouth, the machines stopped, and it was light enough for him to see one of them plunge a feeler into a hole in the wall. There came a familiar clatter as a metal door slid up.

The hall which they now entered was far larger than their former prison and was lit by the soft, white rays of more than a dozen of the luminous globes. The machines evidently had sufficient knowledge of their prisoners to realize that light was necessary. A surprised exclamation broke from Del. The others, following the line of his pointing finger, observed a row of mechanisms arranged down one wall.

“Our time travelers,” Hale exclaimed.

Roy identified the remains of his cylinder and Del’s damaged cage, but was puzzled to see that there were more than a dozen other queer shaped constructions in company with them.

Without a pause they were carried on towards a large machine which occupied the center of the room. Like their bearers, its body case was ovoid in shape, but, unlike them, it possessed no legs and stood half as high again. Save for a pair of lenses and a bunch of

metallic tentacles, it lay like a monstrous egg with a gleaming shell. The prisoners were drawn into a line before it, and the bearers scuttled away, closing the door behind them.

“Well,” said Roy, “what do you suppose is the next move?”

Dell was staring at the machine. Its tentacles were flourishing back and forth, weaving intricate patterns in the air.

A hand suddenly grasped Roy’s arm. He looked at Jessica Tree standing beside him.

“What is it——?” he began.

She only pointed. Three shambling figures had emerged from behind the central machine. Roy looked at them amazedly as they came forward to join the party. All three stood well over six feet, superbly muscled and completely naked. Their heads were small and seemed even smaller above their magnificent chests and the broad spread of their shoulders. A look of bewilderment in their eyes gave way, as they caught sight of Kal and Ril, to relief, mingled with a piteous gladness.

All three bowed before the two dwarfs in a trustfully submissive manner, and the latter, after momentary confusion, acknowledged the salute by raising their arms in some ancient greeting. The three newcomers slouched back a few steps and stood waiting while Kal and Ril hurriedly conferred.

“Tak Four A?” Kal suggested cryptically.

“Undoubtedly, but this must have taken many centuries,” answered Ril.

“What are they?” Roy was still regarding the unclassifiable men. Kal offered explanation.

“I imagine they are the result of Tak Four A’s artificial selection. He held that we were becoming too atrophied physically—you see we are dwarfs, compared with you—and he decided that a more muscular race, which he proposed to call ‘Numen’ must be created. It looks as if he had been extremely successful.”

“Then these are the masters of the world now?”

“I don’t think so. They seem more confused and surprised than we are.”

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He turned and spoke clearly and carefully to one of the tall creatures. For a moment the other looked puzzled, then a light of intelligence came into his eyes. He spoke excitedly and jabbed with a finger in the direction of the derelict time travelers by the wall.

“So they are in the same jam with us,” mused Roy. “But surely they could not have built ——?”

“Certainly they could not,” Kal agreed. “At a rough guess I should say that they were taught to work the thing and sent on an experimental trip by an inventor who valued his own life.”

Jessica, her first fright abated, looked at them with understanding.

“Poor things,” she murmured. “For all their size they’re scared to death—frightened like lost children.”

Del’s voice suddenly brought their attention back to the central machine.

“The thing is trying to communicate with us, but we’ll never be able to make anything of all that waving of feelers.”

The whole party stared blankly at the writhing tentacles, flashing in meaningless gestures. Abruptly, as though realizing that this form of signalling was making no progress, all the feelers, save one, withdrew and coiled up. The one still extended dropped to the floor and began to scratch a series of queer characters on the earthen surface.

It stopped. The feeler pointed first to them and then to the marks it had made. Del stepped forward and inspected the scratchings more closely. He shook his head. The machine grasped the meaning of the gesture. It smoothed the ground and began again. The characters it produced on the second attempt were undeniably different forms from the first, but were no more intelligible.

Patience was evidently the machine's long suit. Four times it had repeated the smoothing and scratching before they craned over to stare at its moving tentacle in excited silence.

"M," it wrote.

"M—E—N?"

Del dropped to his knees. Swiftly he traced a large "YES," in the dirt.

"HOW?" it asked after an interval.

Del pointed to the time traveling machines and ran across the room to indicate the broken part of his own. The machine understood his meaning and its feeler fell to scratching what proved to be the beginning of a tedious written conversation.

"For the Lord's sake," said Roy, sometime later, "tell it to give us some food—we're all in pretty bad need of it."

The door opened a few minutes later in response to some unknown method of communication, and a machine scuttled in bearing circular objects a foot in diameter and three inches thick. Roy picked one up, examined it, and then knocked it experimentally with his knuckles. It gave an unmistakable sound.

"Wood," he said disgustedly, "what the dickens does it think we are? Try it again, Del. Say 'fruit' or something like that."

Some hours later, feeling very much better for the fruit which had been produced in generous quantities, Roy sat beside Jessica and watched the three dwarfs hard at work on one of the time travelers. The damage to Del's machine had been less serious than he had feared. Such parts as had been ruined could be supplied from the duplicate contrivance in which Kal and Ril had traveled. A couple of hours' toil saw the replacements almost completed.

"Not that it's going to help us any," said Betty, complainingly. "You couldn't get more than four into that cage affair, even at a pinch."

Del had agreed.

"But this"—he pointed to the tentacled machine—"is intelligent. Maybe it can duplicate it for us from a pattern."

"That's good," Betty sneered. "I suppose you're trying to kid me that you're not going to slip off in that traveler and leave us here?"

"We have no intention of doing such a thing."

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Betty shrugged her shoulders and moved away. She favored Roy with a contemptuous glance as she passed him, and made her way to the side of the moody Hale Lorrence. It was noticeable that a few minutes later much of his moodiness had evaporated and the two were deeply engaged in a whispered conversation.

Jessica was puzzled by the relationship between Roy and Betty.

"But I don't understand why you brought her," she said. "You're not in love with her."

Roy agreed with a slow nod.

"No, I'm not in love with her—not now. But in 1941, I was. She disappeared that year, and for ten years afterwards I devoted myself to building a time traveler so that I might find her again. I can see now that for all that time I was idealizing her. By 1951 I was no longer in love

with Betty, but with an ideal girl of my own imagining—a Betty, I had built it up in my own mind. You understand?”

“I understand. So when you went back to the real Betty. . . ?”

“It was to fetch her from 1941 to 1951. On the return trip the machine let me down. And,” he added in a voice so low that she could scarcely hear it, “I’m glad it did.”

He paused a moment before he added:

“Tell me, how did you get here—and alone?”

“There’s very little to tell. It happened entirely by accident. I had been helping my father to build the machine—perhaps helping is rather a grand word for the little part I took, but he had no other assistant. My part of the work was far more practical than theoretical.

“I was very hazy as to the principles of the machine, but I was frequently called upon to make tests of the wiring and the connections. Yesterday—thousands of years ago it is now—I was testing some switches in the traveler. My father must have made the main battery connections and forgotten to warn me. The next thing I knew was that the laboratory had disappeared and there was a sandy plain all around me.

“I realized almost at once what had happened and I worked the levers desperately. Nothing responded. I got out of the machine with an idea of going to find help. Then a red thing came marching over the plain. I was frightened so I hid as best I could. The thing came up without noticing me. It lifted up the traveler and threw it down on one side, breaking it badly. Then it went on and I think I lost my head for a time, for I knew I could never mend the machine. I never remember crying in my life before, but I felt so terribly desolate and alone. A little later the white machines came along and found me.”

“Well, you’ve got company now, at any rate,” said Roy. “And I don’t think there is any need to be sad. Del will get us back somehow. I’ve a great faith in that little chap—queer as he looks.”

Hale Lorrence and Betty rose to their feet and began to saunter in the direction of Del and his fellow workers. After some moments’ close examination of the cage, Hale said:

“Your machine is on a slightly different plan from mine. Will you explain it?”

Del indicated the controls and settings while his assistants put finishing touches to the repairs. Betty climbed into the traveler and began fingering the switches. Roy stopped talking to Jessica and watched. There was a furtiveness about the pair that he did not like. Hale seemed to be edging round as though he wanted to gain a coveted position. Kal looked up and proclaimed that the work was finished. Immediately a gleam came into Hale’s eyes.

“Look out,” Roy shouted. But he was too late.

Like a flash Hale snatched a high power heat ray from Kal’s belt.

“Back,” he roared, pointing it at them. “Back, all of you.”

There was no disobeying the command. Kal and Ril drew ray tubes, but both hesitated to use them—the precious time traveler stood right behind Hale. As they backed away, the egg-shaped metal creature in the middle of the room stirred its limbs as though realizing what was afoot. One metal tentacle came snaking across the floor towards Hale. Without hesitation, he pressed the catch of his tube and lopped the shining limb away. Another came shooting in his direction, and it too, fell to the ground. He turned and sent a savage jet of heat searing full at the metal body. He swung back glaring at the group of men. It seemed for a moment that he was minded to end their existences with a final sweep of the heat beam.

Roy’s revolver came into action with a crash. The heavy bullet took Hale in the arm. The tube dropped from his hand and he bolted into the machine. Roy, as he took aim again, saw

the other unwounded hand reach for the switch. Once more his revolver sputtered, but the bullet flattened itself against the wall.

The time traveler, and with it, Hale and Betty, had vanished.

## CHAPTER V

### The Masters of the Machines

An inarticulate cry, something between a moan and a scream, brought them facing to the center of the room. One of the “Numen” was clawing wildly at his body and emitting animal-like howls. Behind him lay the remains of the machine, split by Hale’s ray stroke into two parts. From it a glistening, black tide of life was flowing in their direction. The unfortunate “Numan” had stood nearest, and already the black flow covered him thickly. Even as they watched in unmoving amazement, he fell writhing to the ground and his body became a mere mound in the blackness.

“Ants,” cried Roy as the black horde advanced. “Millions of ants.”

The affrighted group backed up the hall, the two surviving “Numen” gibbering the while with fear. Del caught up the tube which Hale had dropped.

“Low power,” he ordered. “Ray them all.”

There was little need for the command. Kal and Ril were already playing their tubes back and forth across the advancing line, withering the insects by thousands. Julian Tyne, shaken into activity, first by the desertion of his friend and then by the threatening menace, joined in, sweeping his own ray with telling effect.

At every pass they made, thousands of ants shrivelled and became no more than light ash; but still they pushed relentlessly on, marching blindly to certain death. Their centralization had disappeared with the wrecking of their machine and now they were left only with the old instinct to attack. There was little real danger, even Julian’s lesser ray could have wiped them all out in five minutes—but there came an interruption. The familiar clatter of the metal door. Del turned to see a trio of machines scuttering in through the opening. He pushed up his ray to full power and cut away the fast-moving legs with one sweep. The metal bodies dropped and impeded those behind.

Del switched a withering blast of heat on the lintel of the doorway. More by luck than knowledge he succeeded in melting away the supporting catches and the metal sheet crashed down, bisecting two entering machines as it fell. Kal sprang to Del’s side and trained a ray on one of the stranded machines, turning it incandescent; but already from the broken halves in the doorway more black streams of insects were flooding to the attack. Switching his ray to low power lest he should melt the door behind, Del swept a myriad of infuriated ants into eternity. Julian and Ril, behind him, continued the destruction of the first swarm.

Kal dealt rapidly with all three of the powerless machines. Each was rendered red hot, and its crew incinerated before it could escape. Then he joined Del in repelling the second attack.

There came a pandemonium of battering against the door as the machines outside attempted to crash their way in, but the metal sheet was massive enough to defy their most strenuous efforts.

The slaughter of the ants was quickly completed. The four tube holders rayed, on low power, every corner of the great hall to make certain that none had escaped. Only when they were satisfied that the last ant was wiped out did they have opportunity to pause and consider.

“We’ll have to get out of this—and get out quick!” exclaimed Roy.

“But how? There’s no way but the door.”

“Burn our way out,” replied Del. “We’re not far from the open here. You remember we were near the entrance when they turned in here. Which direction was it?”

“The left wall,” said Roy, definitely. “But we can’t burn through that—all the molten stuff will run back on us in here.”

Del shook his head. “We can get rid of that.”

A heat ray was rigged up, pointing directly down at the floor, and then switched on to full power. For ten or twelve seconds the circle of earth below it boiled and seethed furiously while waves of heat rolled through the cavern. Then, abruptly, it vanished leaving only a dark hole. Roy stared.

“What happened?” he inquired.

Del, switching off the tube, smiled at his astonishment.

“There’s no magic about it,” he assured him. “You see, this place we are in is nothing more nor less than a mammoth ant-hill. But ant-hills have workings extending below ground as well as above. We simply melted through the roof of the level below us and the residue has flowed through the passages down there.”

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Approaching as closely as possible, Del began to cut a trench from the foot of the wall to the lip of the newly drilled hole. His back was towards the door, and it was only a warning scream from Jessica which saved him from the fate of the “Numan.” All looked where she pointed. A black carpet of ants was spreading towards them—streaming between the base of the door and the ill-fitting threshold in their hundreds of thousands.

Del turned like a flash and his tube, still at full power, swept them to instant annihilation. Simultaneously a corner of the door became a ragged hole in the metal, its edges dripping molten blobs to the floor. Del set Julian to guard the vulnerable spot and turned with renewed energy to the drilling of the escape tunnel.

Muffled as much as possible against the heat, he stood back on the far side and trained his ray forward. The solid wall began to liquefy. It oozed and dripped down into the trench he had prepared, flowing along until it poured to unknown depths through the hole in the floor. The operation took no more than a few minutes, but the belching waves of heat reduced them in even so short a time to the limit of their endurance. The hot air of the cavern became all but unbreathable. The radiation seemed to scorch them even through their clothing when, to Del’s surprise, daylight broke through at ten to a dozen yards distance.

“We’ve been fortunate,” he remarked, shutting off his tube. “We were nearer the outside than I suspected. I’ve drilled the shaft on a slant so that it will drain. But it will be some hours before it is passable. Now we must get to work—when we’ve made that doorway safe.”

Narrowing his beam, he cut an overhanging piece of the roof so that it fell squarely in front of the hole in the door. Satisfied that the entrance was now completely blocked, he turned his attention to the row of derelict time travelers.

“These,” he said, with a wave of his hand, “are the only means we have of regaining our own time. We cannot take them bodily with us. But we must select the more intricate and essential parts and carry them off. We may be able to discover material for framework, but such things as vacuum tubes, Lestrangle batteries, light-impulse cells and the like, would be a great labor to construct—even if we could do so, which is doubtful.”

Very little of Roy’s machine was worthy of salvage. When he had extracted his two undamaged Lestrangle batteries, he walked over to the two “Numen” who were standing helplessly by their crumpled vehicle and directed them to unbolt such impulse cells as

remained intact. Then he became interested in the other machines. Amongst those unclaimed by anyone present stood two dented metal cubes. Del came over to join him as he pulled on the door of one. It came grudgingly ajar, hanging askew on the twisted frame. A breath of corruption sent the two men staggering back a pace. Holding his breath, Roy reapproached and peered inside. The shrivelled body of a man, in a far state of decomposition, lay huddled into one of the further corners.

“Poor devil,” he muttered, “at least we’ve been luckier than he was.”

Del, with his tube at low power, cremated the decaying body and after waiting a moment for the air to clear they both entered. One wall was lined with rows of tubes and resistances, while on another were control panels attended with tortuous convolutions of wiring. Roy peered hopefully among the serried switches and dials for some clue to the machine’s date of origin, but without success. Del pondered silently over the mechanism for a while. An expression of wonder came over his face.

“What is it?”

Del answered half to himself.

“I considered it impossible.”

“What do you mean?”

“This vehicle is radically different from ours. It does not plunge instantaneously through the time flow. Instead, it has the property of slowing down its contents so that the world outside slips by at high speed by comparison. A slow, inefficient machine—but it worked.”

“I don’t understand.”

“I mean that both our machines—yours and mine—work similarly to the extent that they insulate us entirely from time—that is to say ages pass by us in a flash and we are not affected. But this is not a complete insulating machine; it works with a kind of drag action.

“For instance, if the operator turns this main dial to indicate a speed half way between the normal time flow, and complete insulation, events inside his chamber will take exactly twice as long to happen as they would in the outer world. During the period which seems an hour to him, the events of two hours will take place outside. If he turns the dial further, the events of a week, or a year, flash past in what appears to be an hour. See, he even has a window through which he can watch the happenings of the world fly past.”

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Roy noticed a square of glass set in one wall.

“I think I understand. But what happened?”

“He must have made a mistake somewhere, just as we did, but, unlike us, he was traveling so slowly, even at his top speed, that before he reached this date, he starved and died on the way—another martyr to experiment. It’s a pretty safe guess that we shall find that the same fate overtook the man in the other cube.”

Kal came over to summon Del with the information that the salvaged parts had been laid out, awaiting his decision as to which should be taken and which left. Under his direction the selected fragments were divided among the party for portage. A further inspection of the passage revealed that it was still too hot for use. They must wait at least another hour. Del looked worried and examined the joints of floors and walls carefully for any traces of the ants breaking through.

“Ants,” said Roy musingly as they waited. “Insects working those machines—ruling the world, perhaps—it’s incredible.”

“It’s logical,” Del contradicted.



“I don’t get that.”

“It was inevitable sooner or later. They’ve always had a far better organization than man, even in my century—no wasted effort, no need to struggle continually with subversive factors. The only thing which stopped them being masters of the world, from the beginning, was their size. Now they have found a way of overcoming that disability. There’s a natural limit to the size of insects.”

“Why not?”

“Oxygen. They do not breath as we do, but absorb the oxygen through the surface. If they became large, there would not be enough absorption area in proportion to the bulk inside. They would just die of suffocation.”

“Yes. I see that. But to find them working machines—and such machines—just staggers me.”

“But why? It’s just their natural way out of the difficulty. After all, we did the same. Where would man have been without his machines? If you want a parallel, just think of one of the warships of your own time—twelve hundred or more men, working a great, floating monster, just as these insects in their thousands work their scuttering metal machines. It puzzles me that I didn’t think of it the moment we saw the style of their machines. These things always seem so obvious afterwards.”

Roy nodded. “But still, I would never have believed if I hadn’t seen,” he added.

A rattle of falling dirt startled the group. They looked apprehensively upward. A shining metal tentacle protruded through a small hole in the roof. An increasing rain of debris pattered all about them as it moved from side to side, enlarging the aperture.

## CHAPTER VI

### “Into the Tunnels!”

Kal’s tube sent a shaft of heat shooting up. Either from haste or misjudgment he had it notched at full power. The tentacle was melted off and fell, but the heat beam had seared on into the roof. There came an ominous cracking and the men, with a startled glance, took to their heels in the direction of the escape tunnel. Almost as they drew clear, the weakened spot gave way and the machine, with an avalanche of dirt, crashed to the floor.

Even as it broke open, rivers of ants came swarming out of the gaping seams. With a second crash another machine fell through the hole, and after it, another. It seemed that the insects cared little how many machines were wrecked to secure the victory.

“Into the tunnel,” shouted Del. “We must risk it now.”

The rest scampered to obey, holding their precious burdens in their arms. Kal charged ahead with his weapon held ready and his short legs moving with twinkling rapidity. The rest followed him closely. Roy heard a howl of agony break from the two “Numen” as their bare feet encountered the hot surface, but their fear of the ants was greater than their discomfort and they held on their way.

The heat of the passage was intense; it beat at them like a furnace glare. Jessica staggered just ahead of Roy. He caught her around the waist with his free arm and dragged her on. The two of them pitched together over the outer edge into the daylight—he had forgotten that the slant of the tunnel meant a six-foot drop at the other end. Del had remained till the last. He raged furiously at the increasing horde until he was sure that his companions were clear, then he too, turned and ran for safety. He fell from the tunnel mouth, narrowly missing the prostrate Roy.

“Only a dozen yards of that inferno,” said the latter, sitting up. “It seemed like a hundred. Anyhow, it’s a sight too hot for the ants to get across it. We’re clear of them for a bit.”

Del agreed, but he wished to make sure.

“Lift me up on your shoulders,” he directed. Roy did so, and the dwarf played a narrow ray on the sloping passage roof till it fell, completely closing the entrance.

“Any casualties?” Roy inquired as he lowered the other.

“No, except these two,” Jessica pointed to the two “Numen” who were sitting down ruefully examining their scorched soles. “And they’re more surprised than hurt. I should think,” she added, “that the vacuum tubes have suffered.”

A hurried inspection revealed that only one had been smashed.

“And now, where do we go from here?” Roy asked Del who, by general consent, had become director of the party.

“We get away very quickly before they realize what has happened and start a search for us,” Del replied.

It took but a short time to cross the open ground and gain the cover of the forest. Roy, looking back for a final view of the rearing cliffs which was the side of the stupendous ant-hill, was relieved to discern no signs of pursuit.

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Several hours of heavy going found them a weary party. The three dwarfs had very soon given out; their small bodies were of little use for this kind of rough going. One of the

“Numen,” noticing their distress, handed his bundle over to his fellow and, as though it were the most natural thing in the world, raised Kal and Ril to his broad shoulders. The other placed both bundles upon one shoulder and seated Del on the other.

“That proves it,” declared Kal as he recovered from his surprise. “These are the descendants of Tak Four A’s ‘Numen.’ Brawn, developed to assist brains.”

For some miles they had proceeded along the bed of a stream with the dual purpose of losing the scent and of making slightly easier progress than was possible among the trees. On a corner the leading “Numan” stopped short. Roy craned round him to ascertain the cause. He found himself staring at one of the six-legged machines. It stood motionless on the grass verge of the left bank, glistening in the sunlight.

Del pulled out his tube, but as he levelled it the machine became aware of them and scurried swiftly sideways. For a moment it paused, waving its tentacles slightly as though uncertain whether to attack or no, then it flashed away into the trees and out of sight.

“Damn it,” said Roy, as he watched the last glitter of the receding shell. “It will give the alarm.” Rather bitterly he added, “Why didn’t you melt the thing?”

“Because I had no desire to set the whole forest on fire,” Del replied calmly.

Tired as they were, they pressed on with greater speed. They must, Del pointed out, reach some defensible spot. While they remained among the trees they were liable to concealed attack from any side. Another two hours brought them to a district where open spaces were more frequent, but still Del was unsatisfied. At the edge of a sizeable clearing, Roy struck.

“Jessica’s pretty dead beat, Julian’s very little better, and I’ve had enough, too. We’ll find nothing to beat this. If we camp in the middle, we can defend all round.”

Julian upheld the suggestion in a tired, dispirited voice. Del opened his mouth, but before he could speak there came an interruption:

“Get into the trees, you fools,” roared a voice.

For a second nobody moved.

“I mean it,” called the voice, somewhere above their heads. “They’re coming after you. Get moving.”

The tone was so insistent that this time they obeyed without question. As Roy, who was the last to climb, swung himself up the branches, he heard the approach of a multitudinous scuttering. Looking down he could see the flashing surfaces of a dozen or more passing ant machines.

“Close call,” said a voice above him.

“Certainly was—it’d have been a damn sight closer if you hadn’t been about,” Roy answered softly.

“It’s all right. You needn’t whisper. Those tin things can’t hear. I’ve tried ’em. What’s more, they’re too dumb to look for anything up above ’em. You’re safe here.”

Roy leaned back and looked up at the speaker on his higher branch. He was a man of knotty, compact build clad in a torn shirt and ill-used khaki pants. The greater part of his face was hidden beneath an unruly growth of black beard and whiskers, but his mouth smiled, and there was a zestful twinkle in his eyes. Roy climbed higher and stretched out his hand. It was taken in a hardened, calloused grip.

“You can’t guess how glad I am to see you folks—whatever you are. I’d just about decided that I’d got the world to myself—save for them crawlin’ tin cans down there. I’m Jim Hollis. About four days ago I was somewhere near Indianapolis—the Lord knows where I am now.”

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Roy introduced himself. He added:

“Do you know of any safe place for us? We’re mostly about played out.”

Jim Hollis scratched his chin reflectively through his matted beard. He cast a glance towards the sun, now well in the west.

“Can you make two miles—maybe, two and a half?” he inquired.

“If it’s worth while, I guess we could manage that.”

“It’s worth while, all right. There’s some caves I found in a cliff over there”—he jerked his head in an easterly direction—“I’d be there now, myself, but I couldn’t make the entrance on my own. Way up above my head.”

“It can be defended?” asked Del from a branch near by.

The man looked curiously at the dwarf.

“Sure,” he agreed, “but it don’t need it. If I couldn’t make the grade, I’m damned if one of them tin things could do it. If we’re goin’, we’d better move right now. It’ll be sunset in a couple of hours.”

He swung himself down the branches and dropped to the ground. The rest of them followed his lead. The dwarfs’ true proportions were revealed as they descended to the ground. At the sight of them and the accompanying “Numen,” the man’s eyes widened with amazement.

“Say, what the——?” he began.

Roy tactfully interposed.

“Lead on,” he said, “I’ll tell you as we go.”

“You’ll have to. I’m all dazed up. It’s all happened so sudden-like. I was just hiking along hoping to jump a truck ride to Indianapolis, when a guy comes out from a shack by the roadside and says he’ll give me five bucks if I’ll lend him a hand. I’d mostly forgotten what five bucks look like, so I said I would. He’d got a piece of machinery he couldn’t move by himself and he wanted it brought out of the shack into the yard.

“Rummy lookin’ sort of cage with a sling seat in it. We got it out easy enough between us and then he went back to find the five bucks, so I sat down in the sling seat. There was a lot of little switches and thingummies in front of it, so I pressed one, just interested like—next thing I knew, me and the machine was crashin’ down through a lot of branches like these.”

He looked disparagingly at the growths about him. “And they ain’t even ordinary trees. Nothin’s ordinary around these parts—what’s more, I ain’t got my five bucks.”

Roy attempted to explain the situation and to tell how the rest of them had similarly come to grief. The man, Jim, grunted doubtfully:

“Sounds crazy to me,” he observed, “but then, it’s no crazier than having them tin things runnin’ about the place. Ants inside of ’em, you say?”

“Yes, ants.”

Jim sniffed. He was still a trifle uncertain whether this might not be some deep scheme to pull his leg.

“And what about the big red things that walk on two legs? What’s in them? Black beetles?” he inquired.

Roy had forgotten the red machines. He smiled at Jim’s suggestion and admitted that none of the party had yet had an opportunity of investigating these inhabitants of this strangely transformed world.

Jim’s estimate of two miles was modest by half, but they came at length, and without molestation, to the edge of the forest. Across a hundred yards of turf rose a cliff-face, pitted in

many places with dark holes.

“How’s that?” asked Jim, triumphantly pointing to the largest. It measured some ten feet in diameter at the entrance.

“But how do we get there?” Julian objected, looking at the twenty-five feet of sheer cliff which must be scaled.

“Easy enough to reach it by standing on one another’s shoulders.”

“I have a better idea than that,” Del remarked.

He produced a ray tube and with a series of heat jets, drilled a zig-zag line of holes up the rock face.

“Gee, that’s a dandy flashlight you’ve got,” Jim murmured admiringly.

Roy ascended the holds after a short interval for cooling. As a precaution he took with him a heat ray set ready at low power. The first glance showed him that the cave was both empty and dry. It broadened out to about fifteen feet a yard or two inside the entrance, and ran back nearly thirty feet into the cliff. Luck had favored them with an ideally safe refuge. He stood up at the mouth and looked out towards the setting sun.

“It’s o. k.,” he called to the group of upturned faces. “Come on, all of you. Back to the Stone Age.”

## CHAPTER VII

### In Search of Metal

"The problems of food and water have been easily settled," said Del, addressing the group on the following day. "It is indeed lucky for us that fruit grows in such profusion. But though this will keep us alive, it will not assist us to solve the problem of our return. For that, one thing is essential—we must have metal."

Roy looked up from his occupation of plaiting creeper strands into a rope.

"I was wondering what you intended to do about that," he remarked.

"What's the metal for?" asked Jim.

"We must have a framework for the machine which I propose to build—and it must be a metal framework. You want to get back, don't you?"

"Sure I do. That guy still owes me five bucks."

"What kind of metal?" Roy inquired.

Del shrugged his shoulders. "A steel containing chromium and tungsten in small quantities would be best—failing that, some other hard metal could be made to serve. I also want some copper, or other good conductor. Very luckily, most of our salvaged parts have withstood the journey." Turning to Jim, he added: "Is your machine still in the branches where it fell?"

"No—the tin things found it and carried it off. I watched them from a tree."

Reflectively, Del looked out of the cave towards the giant ant-hill towering over the trees in the distance. Jim's arrival accounted for one of the extra time travelers they had seen there, he wondered about the others . . . Jim's voice broke in on the unprofitable speculation.

"Maybe, if we scouted round a bit more, we might find a town or something. Anyway there ought to be a road leading to a town—where there's a town, there's sure to be metal."

Del shook his head gently.

"You don't realize. There are no towns."

"No towns?"

"Neither towns, nor men."

"You're foolin' me. They can't all be dead."

"They must be, or the insects would not be ruling."

"But—but do you mean the ants have killed all the men?"

"It seems unlikely. Probably men just stopped."

"I don't get you?"

"Men did not kill off the great reptiles who ruled the world before them—the reptiles just stopped. It seems to me that man, too, has 'had his little day and ceased to be.'"

"But what's the good of his ever having lived if it all finishes this way?"

"What is the use of life? Perhaps man came to a glorious finish. Fulfilled his destiny and vanished from the earth—he had to leave the earth sooner or later. At least he has not been compelled to linger on a globe drifting into senile decay."

"It doesn't look decaying to me." Jim gazed out at the gently swaying trees.

"But we found ourselves in a desert when we stopped. Miles of it, overlaying what once was fruitful country—how far did that desert stretch? For all we know, this may be an oasis of forest in a world of deserts. And have you noticed the sun—how much larger and more fiery red it is than our accustomed sun?—Signs of the coming end, both of them."

He was silent for a moment before he added: “Then there was the ant machine which questioned us. Its knowledge of the past must have been profound, yet it tried us with a series of symbols utterly unknown to any of us. One wonders what strange creatures used those symbols, sometime between the end of man and the rise of the insect. Yes, we are far past the age of *homo sapiens*.”

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No one spoke for a while. It was Roy who broke the spell.

“This is morbid,” he declared. “Our present concern is to regain the age of *homo sapiens*—and our immediate need is metal.”

Jessica, sitting beside him, drew a breath as though to speak, and then changed her mind.

“Yes?” he encouraged.

“I hardly like to suggest it—I mean, it’s dangerous.”

“What is it?”

“Well, the ants’ white machines——”

“Yes?”

“Well, they must be made of a very hard metal.”

Roy brought his hand down on his knee with a slap of approval.

“Good girl, you’ve hit it. We’ve got to grab one of those machines somehow or other.”

The expeditionary force eventually comprised only three men, Roy, Jim Hollis and Julian. The two “Numen” would have been useful, but, since it was considered unwise to trust them with heat rays, they would have been defenceless in case of an attack. They would, therefore, be summoned later to help with the portage, if necessary. Moreover, it was important that some weapons should be left with the rest of the party in case of trouble. Both Roy and Jim, before they left, were handed high power rays and instructed in the use of them. Julian retained his own, low power weapon.

“What puzzles me, is how we are going to attract the things,” Roy said.

“Forget it. There’s no attracting needed. All we’ve got to do is get up a tree near a clearing, and wait. They’ll come along soon enough. It’s dollars to doughnuts we spot some within a couple of hours. Them tin things are for ever snoopin’ around—the Lord knows what for.”

They progressed cautiously with Jim in the lead, scanning the surrounding growths for the slightest sign of a metallic flash, and ready to jump for the branches. The chosen clearing, a mile or so distant, was reached without alarms. There, they climbed one of the loftiest trees and settled themselves among the boughs to wait.

After an hour of patience, Roy caught the sound of activity on the far side of the open space. As it approached, it resolved itself into a crackling of branches accompanied by a faint clanking. He moved into an attitude of readiness and slipped the ray tube out of his pocket. Jim put out a restraining hand.

“It’s not the tin things. It’s the big, red brutes. I know the sound of ’em.”

The next minute proved him right. Five of the twenty-foot machines left the trees and stalked stiffly on their trellised legs across the other end of the clearing.

“Five again,” Roy murmured.

“Always five together—never more, never less. And if I know anything about it, it means that some of the ant machines are around these parts,” Jim replied.

Less than ten minutes after the red stalkers had disappeared, there came a flash of reflected sunlight among the trees. A moment later, no less than ten of the six-legged machines

emerged. They paused in a bunch and there was a great waving of silver tentacles. Roy wondered why it was that the machines were not rendered less conspicuous with a coating of neutral shaded paint—it was merely one of many puzzling points about them.

As a result of the conference, the party broke up. Eight scurried away in the wake of the red monsters, another doubled back the way they had come while the remaining one retreated to the shadow of the trees and stood motionless. Jim nudged Roy.

“There’s our meat,” he said.

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With stealth and care they wriggled back along the branches and slid to the ground. Keeping twenty or so yards back from the edge of the clearing, they began to work round into position. The fact that their progress was accompanied by a considerable crackling of twigs underfoot, did not worry them, but it was essential that no waving of bushes, carelessly brushed aside, should attract the attention of the sharp lenses. Moreover, a look out must be kept for other roving machines. At fifty yards range, Jim suggested that they take to the trees again.

Roy, through a leafy gap, trained his ray on the motionless sentry, and pressed the catch. His aim was good. A quick switch of the wrist from left to right, and the narrow blade of heat scythed the legs from beneath it. It fell with a thud. The tentacles writhed for a few seconds and then dropped to lie listlessly on the ground. As they sank, the ant army came surging from its fallen craft. Roy swiftly adjusted his tube to lower power and wide aperture and joined Jim and Julian who were already fanning their beams at the black flood. In a few moments the insects had withered from sight, and the damaged machine was theirs.

Roy swung down from the tree and advanced with his tube cautiously levelled against the possibility of another rush of ants. He tapped experimentally on the metal casing, but none emerged. Again he set his ray to a small aperture, preparatory to slicing the metal into portable sections. Barely had he raised the tube when there came a cry from Jim who pointed wildly across the clearing.

Roy spun round to see two more white machines headed in a scuttering dash towards him. He swung his ray without hesitation and brought down the leader. Its own momentum sent it sliding a dozen yards on its shining belly. As it fell, he turned his attention to the other. But the second attacker was not destined to fall such an easy victim.

He was raising his hand when a metal tentacle from behind him snapped around his body, knocking his weapon spinning towards the trees. He realized as the arm gripped him that he had been fooled. Some of the ants remained in the first machine and had successfully played ’possum until this moment. He cursed himself for not having the foresight to put its lenses out of action.

The trees behind him literally exploded into flame as the tube fell among them. Jim and Julian leaped from their perches with lightning agility and came pounding to Roy’s defence with ready weapons. The last, unharmed machine, dashing on with tentacles extended, was almost upon him. Their line of fire was masked by Roy’s body.

He tugged frenziedly at his metal bond, but it had frozen into inflexibility, holding him as prey for the other. Jim decided to take a desperate chance. He steadied and aimed. The searing heat beam passed within inches of the helpless Roy and the hot air scorched his face, but the blast passed on to shear the legs from one side of the rushing monster. The unsupported side fell with a crash and the machine swiveled wildly to one side. It rolled over and over till it came to a final rest within a yard of Roy’s feet.



But the danger was far from over. Jim bounded towards him; fused the restraining tentacle at its base and dragged him free just as the swarming ants broke from their wrecked craft. Only then did the three men become aware of the great flames licking out from the blazing trees towards them.

“We’ve got to get out of this, and quick. We’ve sure started something this trip,” said Jim, as Roy unwrapped the severed tentacle. “The Lord knows what that tube will do now it’s on the loose. Anyway, all the animated tin cans in this crazy world are likely to happen along, just to see who’s been jokin’ around here.”

“But the metal——”

“Damn the metal. There’s plenty more—we can’t move fast and carry the stuff. Till this blows over, we go home and lie doggo for a bit.”

The three crossed the clearing at top speed. In the shelter of the opposite trees they paused to look back. A vast funnel of flame was belching into the heavens and, above it, thick gouts of smoke broadened, mushroom-like. Jim shook a rueful head.

“Ain’t that just our darned luck?” he growled.

## CHAPTER VIII

### The Wrong Machine

There followed several weeks, uneventful to the castaways. Roy and Jim had returned to the scene of their fight on the following day, and made encouraging discoveries. The first was that the fire started by Roy's lost tube had spread only a very little distance beyond its raging center. With no wind to fan them, the flames had dwindled away and finally snuffed out. The tube itself was irretrievably lost somewhere in a crater of its own making. It had melted the ground and the rocks beneath it and sunk out of sight into the molten pool. Whether it had destroyed itself, or whether it was still digging deeper and deeper into the earth, neither of the men knew—nor cared to any great extent. They were far too elated at finding that the machines they had vanquished still lay where they had fallen.

“Wonder why they haven't taken them away?” Roy had said. Jim snorted.

“You're always wondering about the things. What's the use of tryin' to get inside an insect's mind, anyway? You couldn't do it in a lifetime. Probably they never repair—only build new machines. The thing that counts now is that here is the metal just waiting for us to carry it off.”

With the help of most of the party, the transport had been successfully accomplished. Though more than once on the journey it was necessary to drop their burdens and take to the trees to avoid wandering machines. A growing acquaintance with the dangers of the world about them and with the limited capabilities of their enemies began to have a tonic effect on the party. Jim Hollis had never shown anything more than contempt for what he called “animated tinware,” and the rest were fast adopting his point of view.

Del, with Kal for an assistant, had gone to work right away on the construction of a new time traveler once he had assured himself that the metals were suitable. Ril, whose offers of assistance had been refused on the ground that more than one helper would lead to confusion, busied himself in experimenting with the least damaged of the captured machines, a pursuit in which he was joined by Julian. Jim Hollis was appointed head of the foraging staff and, with the help of the two “Numen,” saw that a plentiful supply of fruit and water was maintained.

Jessica and Roy found themselves much together. Since the ant machines were seldom to be seen in the immediate vicinity of the cliffs, they had formed the habit of taking their strolls in the neighbourhood. Roy, after a month or more of this existence, had come to accept their way of life as a commonplace rather than an adventure. He discovered with a sense of surprise that Jessica did not share this view.

“How long,” she asked him one morning, “how long will it be before Del completes his machine?”

Roy looked at her doubtfully. There was something in her tone that he could not place. It was not exactly an eagerness for release from this strange world, and yet . . .

“Not more than a day or two, now, I believe, but he is not sure that some further adjustments won't be necessary. You're feeling homesick?”

Jessica failed to reply for a moment. She held her gaze fixed straight ahead and there was a slight petulance in the line of her mouth. At length she answered in a dull voice:

“I suppose I am. After all, one could hardly wish to stay here for ever. Sometimes, at nights, it comes over me in a perfect wave of longing. I look out and see nothing but the

dimness of the stars and hear nothing but the stirring of the trees, then I long for our bustling twenty-third century. I want to see the sky split by the green fire at the tail of an Asia-bound rocket, or the red gush from the Europe express.

“Sometimes, on clear nights, we could see from our house the pure white flames streaming from the Mars space ship as it spurted from its cradle. And then, too, there was never this terrible quiet. Even when one was shut away, there was always a sense of movement; of a world where men and their machines all worked to some purpose—a rustling sense of life even in the quietest places. I feel a horrible sense of futility that it has all come only to this—to the insects.”

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“I’m sure you are wrong there. If we had found men still existing at this date, I should feel that it did seem futile. It would mean that man must die when the world dies. But, since there is no sign of him, I am convinced that he achieved his true end—whatever that may have been—and gone on his way, leaving the world to other forms of life so that they may achieve their ends.”

“I think you are an optimist, Roy, but I hope you are right. I confess I don’t feel very cheerful about anything just now.”

“While I seem to feel happier than I ever remember—I could almost hope that Del’s machine should turn out a failure. I wish . . .” He stopped a trifle abruptly. A light crept into Jessica’s eyes. The corners of her mouth lifted ever so slightly.

“Yes?” she prompted gently. But Roy was not looking, he did not see the change that had come over her.

“I don’t know. It seems so unnecessary that we should go back to our own centuries—and yet, we must.”

“Must?”

“Well, imagine what a misfit I should be in Del’s century.”

Jessica sighed to herself over the obtuseness of men.

“I can’t imagine you in Del’s century,” she said.

But Roy missed the emphasis which was laid upon the word “Del,” and took the statement at its face value. Jessica let the subject drop. She had learned what she wanted to know, the rest was a matter of careful handling—she might even have to propose herself in the end.

Half an hour later, as they were returning to the cave, Roy announced that there was a surprise awaiting her. Ril and Julian in their experiments with the captured ant machine, had succeeded in making it workable. The machinery cased in the lower part of the ovoid body and partitioned off, had been found to be intact. It had not been a great labor with the help of the heat rays to braise on salvaged legs in place of those shorn away.

Then, more to give themselves employment than for any other reason, the two men had set about adapting the controls for human use. They had given themselves to the solution of a number of ingenious problems which turned out, in most cases, less difficult than they had expected. Much of the work consisted merely of clearing away many of the stages necessary for insect manipulation.

“What I mean is,” said Roy, explaining, “a man might need a block and tackle to lift a heavy log which an elephant would lift direct. This time, Ril and Julian were in the position of the elephant—they could dispense with much of the intermediate mechanical aid. They’re as pleased with the thing as a child with a new toy. It’s going to be ready to show off its tricks when we get back.”

“But what’s the good of it?”

“None, I think. They merely felt an interest in the thing, and it gave them something to do. They solved it as one might solve any other puzzle. You’ll see it soon.”

His words were borne out a few hundred yards from home. They saw the glittering machine approach, slowly scrabbling over the ground towards them. It stopped as they came into view and stood still, its tentacles waving in the usual manner of the ant-operated craft. Roy gave a chuckling laugh.

“A pretty good imitation. If I hadn’t been expecting it, I’d have rayed the thing right off—and that would have been remarkably uncomfortable for Ril and Julian.”

As if at the thought, his hand went to his belt. It encountered the butt of his revolver, but the ray tube was missing. He cursed his carelessness in not bringing it; such an omission might well have had tragic results. He and Jessica advanced together.

“Now, Ril, put it through its paces,” he called.

But the machine merely continued to stand, swaying its tentacles. A sudden misgiving shot through Roy’s mind. To reassure himself he called:

“What are you trying to do? Scare us?”

Jessica drew closer to his side. She was aware of an uncomfortable sense that all was not well.

“Suppose it isn’t——?” she began. She got no further, for at that moment the machine snapped into action. It came scuttering full at them, tentacles outstretched.

“Run,” cried Roy, but instead, she shrank towards him.

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He jerked out his revolver and spat a burst of ineffective shots. The machine charged down on them. A feeler wrapped about Jessica’s waist and snatched her from his side, another looped about his wrist, dragging him along. With a violent twist of his arm he broke its grip and fell to the ground. Jessica screamed as the metal legs thudded past within inches of his head. The machine did not wait to recapture him; holding the girl clear of the ground, it made straight for the trees. Roy grabbed for his fallen revolver, jumped to his feet and raced vainly after it. The danger of hitting Jessica was too great for him to risk a shot, and the machine, looking like some great, shining beetle, was traveling twice his speed. The girl gave one final, despairing cry, then captor and captive disappeared among the branches.

For a few dazed seconds Roy continued to run, before his senses reasserted themselves and sent him shouting in the direction of the cave. Consternation reigned in the group as he panted out his news.

“Give me a ray tube,” he demanded. “I’ll wreck that machine and bring Jessica back, if it’s the last thing I do.”

Del caught his arm.

“You could never catch it before it reached the ant-hill, and it’s no good trying single-handed to——”

Ril broke in. He had exchanged a hurried whisper with Julian which sent the other running towards the cave.

“We’ll take the machine,” he said, “Julian and I have finished it and tested it.”

Roy, without hesitation, dashed to the spot where the renovated craft lay and started hurling aside the branches which masked it. Ril clambered up a rough ladder set against the side and slid into the interior through a hole in the top.

“Tubes—we must have them,” Roy called.

Del handed over two high power tubes and one low one. The only remaining tube he retained in case of attack.

“Get the girl back and we will go,” he said. “The time traveler will be ready when you return.”

Julian came running back with an armful of additional apparatus which he lugged aboard. Roy slid in last and slapped the covering panel shut. Ril and Julian were already at the controls. The machine stirred with a slight lurch, then, with metal legs flashing in the sunlight, it scuttled at full speed for the trees and the spire of the giant ant-hill beyond them.

## CHAPTER IX

### Pursuers

For the first hour silence was scarcely broken. Ril could spare no attention from the delicate occupation of steering the unfamiliar machine, and Julian was engaged in arranging some of the apparatus he had so hurriedly gathered. Noticeable among it was the lamp which they had used to light the cave. Roy moved restlessly about the confined space, peering through one or another of the observation holes which had been pierced in the metal shell. Continually he turned to urge Ril to greater speed. The dwarf shook his head. Already they were at the speed limit of safe travel, and time and again he avoided a crash with some tree only by the swiftest dexterity. The greatest concern which beset him was lest they should reach some unfordable stream and be forced to a long detour, but the fear was unfounded.

The first water they encountered was a clear brook flowing rapidly over a shallow bed of stones and, without hesitation, they took it in a shower of sparkling drops. As they were mounting the further bank, the first untoward incident occurred; there came a mighty crash to one side and a tree toppled slowly. It missed them as it fell by only a few feet. Another crash close at hand caused Ril to steer the machine hastily to the right. Roy was flung to the floor by the sudden change of direction.

“What was that?” he demanded, as he scrambled up.

“Rocks,” said Ril, briefly. “They nearly got us, too.”

Roy remembered the scene they had witnessed on the day of their arrival.

“It’s the red things. They’ve spotted us. Here, give me a ray.”

He thrust his head and shoulders out of the top panel and looked about him. No enemy was visible, but away ahead he could hear the crackling of branches as something drew nearer.

“Coming this way. Move off a bit.”

Ril obeyed speedily and a moment later a rock landed on the spot where they had paused. Roy guessed that they must have been seen as they made the crossing and that the rocks were being thrown by guesswork. A red machine stalked into view and halted uncertainly. The silver ant craft was now effectively screened from its view by a clump of bushes.

A second presently joined it. Roy hesitated only for a second—with Jessica still at stake, they could afford to waste no time; he lifted the ray tube. One sweep sliced off a trellised leg and the machine, as it tottered, fell against its companion. The two swayed for a space and then went down together with a resounding crash and a furious flailing of their jointed arms.

“Right away—flat out,” Roy called, and Ril threw in the lever which sent them scurrying on their course.

The red machines were about the countryside in unusual numbers, they discovered as they continued, but further direct encounters were successfully avoided. Moreover, as they drew nearer to the ant-hill, they began to meet with an increasing number of machines similar to their own. These, at first, they gave a wide berth, but it soon became obvious that they had no need to fear molestation, since the ants gave no sign of suspecting their presence.

They were still some two miles from the hill when Roy, at a forward peephole, gave an excited cry. Disappearing into the trees on the far side of a clearing he had caught a glimpse of Jessica’s captor with her form still closely wrapped in its tentacles. Ril urged them at full speed across the open ground and plunged into the forest hard on the track. But, despite his

utmost efforts, it was not until they emerged into the space ringing the base of the anthill that they caught another glimpse of the marauder.

Their gain had been appreciable and Roy decided to risk a ray flash; they could not hope to overtake the other before it reached the dark entrance to the hill. His ray, at low power, flashed on the twinkling legs with no result. He pushed the power up a notch and tried again. This time he succeeded in fusing one of the rear leg joints so that the metal limb became rigid. Unfortunately, it projected clear, and hampered progress not at all. The tube was just levelled for a third shot when a hand grasped his wrist and he turned to face Julian. The latter spoke angrily.

“Put that away, you fool,” he snapped. “Can’t you see that if you did bring the thing down, it would most likely kill Jessica in the fall—even if it didn’t, she’d be covered with ants in a few seconds.”

The possibility shook Roy badly; he cursed his own foolhardiness as he returned the tube to his belt. Julian turned his back and began to adjust the lamp, now erected at one of the larger spy holes. A minute later the leading machine, still clutching Jessica, disappeared into the dark mouth of the entrance. After it, all six legs threshing furiously, pounded the avenger.

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Julian pressed a switch and a beam of dazzling brilliance bored down the tunnel before them. The vast central roadway stretched out like a dirigible hangar of infinite length. Here and there the upsweeping curves of the walls were pierced with side turnings; mysterious, gaping mouths whose immenseness was dwarfed only by the proportions of the main artery. Of traffic, there was little at the present, but such machines as were visible scuttled along with a methodical orderliness, keeping to the right of the track and paying no attention either to pursuer or pursued.

“Why don’t they attack us?” Roy wondered.

“Too specialized,” replied Ril. “Their whole organization is worked on a basis of calculation. Precision and instinct. They know, for instance, that there is danger from the red stalking machines outside; that danger is calculated and allowed for. But when they face us, they are up against the incalculable and their instincts are not any help to them. For centuries, perhaps, they have not been called upon to cope with the unexpected.”

“But they attacked and captured us in the first place.”

“True, but then they were in the open, where dangers might be expected and their instinct was to overcome a challenge. It requires more than instinct and simple calculation to grasp the idea of one of their own machines being turned against them. You notice that even the one we are following has shown no sign of perturbation; it has just kept steadily on its way and paid no attention to anything else.”

“Then we are safe from interference? All we have to do is to recapture Jessica when we reach the other machine and march out with her.”

Ril looked doubtful. It seemed unlikely that it would be as simple as that.

“We are all right, I think, until we are discovered by the central intelligence. We can’t tell what will happen then.”

“But how do you know there is a central intelligence?”

Ril lifted one hand from the controls of the racing vehicle and waved it in an expressive sweep.

“Something must control all this. Besides, you remember the machine which wrote on the floor—it was obviously designed for brain work of some kind. It had no legs to move about

on. It was a calculating machine—a kind of composite thinking mechanism. Somewhere in this ant mountain there must be a super-calculator capable not only of working from known factors, but of reasoning from probabilities. A kind of central brain of which our questioner was a mere subsidiary.”

“It sounds too improbable.”

“I don’t think so. Since the insects had even more natural obstacles to overcome than man had, they must, of necessity, use more involved apparatus.”

While Ril spoke, they gradually gained on the machine ahead. Now a bare twenty yards separated the two. Julian already had his hands on the control levers of the tentacles and was ready to send them coiling out the moment the range permitted. The leader turned with a sudden swerve down a passage to the left. Only by skillful manipulation did Ril avoid overshooting the corner, but he succeeded, and they gained yet another couple of yards. The three men grew tenser as the distance lessened. Julian’s knuckles were white on the levers, and his face strained. Roy again thrust his head and shoulders through the top panel and held his tube ready for action. Then, with disconcerting suddenness, the passage walls fell away and they sped out into a large, circular hall.

Roy had a glimpse of serried ranks of the white metal machines gleaming and glittering in the rays of their lamp, then his eyes rose to the structure which dominated the whole vast room. It stood, raised on a dais in the exact center—a huge, metallic sphere sprouting with a multitude of shining feelers. At that moment, Julian went into action. Judging his distance to a nicety, he sent a tentacle whipping round one of the rear legs of Jessica’s captor.

Simultaneously, Ril slowed their machine and there came a jerk which almost dislodged Roy from his perch. The legs of the leader crumpled beneath it and the shining belly met the ground with a thud. Julian, with the full power of the attached tentacle, began to draw it back towards them. From his vantage point, Roy sliced with a pencil-thick ray at the roots of the feelers which bound Jessica. The whole affair had taken place so quickly that they had been unmolested, but, as the last strand parted, there came an ominous stirring in the ranks of the surrounding machines.

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Ril’s voice rose insistently.

“Quick. Get that central globe.”

Roy perceived that the many feelers around it had sprung into furiously writhing signals. With sweeps of his ray at full power, he carved it into sections. As the parts fell, he saw the outflow of myriads of ants running like glistening streams of molasses across the floor.

“Too late,” cried Ril. “It’s given the order.”

Roy swung his beam around the closing circle of machines while the tentacles under Julian’s control, sought and grasped the prostrate form of Jessica. They snatched her from the ground a split second before the insect hordes swept to the spot.

“We’ve got to run for it,” Ril called up as he manoeuvred their craft to the right about. “Clear a way to the passage.”

The few machines in their path were swiftly dealt with, but, while Roy’s attention was taken aside, the rest of the circle was closing in.

“Full speed,” he roared down to the dwarf.

They tore forward with a jerk; the light and Roy’s heat ray blazing ahead of them. Once in the comparative safety of the corridor, he turned around and devoted his attention to hindering the pursuit. Dozens fell to his ray, but he saw that in spite of his destruction, the mass was



gaining. At a sudden idea, he thrust the power of his tube down a couple of notches and gave an exclamation of satisfaction at the result. The machines, instead of being blotted out, were now being fused into immobility and presenting considerable difficulties to the advance of those in the rear. A second inspiration struck him and he called to Ril to slow down.

He swung his ray across the passage and rendered useless the first rank of the pursuers. As those behind came climbing over them, he swung the ray back along the line so that they were fused above their fellows. Still more came scrambling over and again the ray swept across. A grim smile of success twitched his mouth as he steadily continued his tactics. At great speed he was building a solid wall of fused metal between himself and the pursuers. It was but a short time before it blocked the passage from the floor to the curved roof. The moment it was complete, he jumped to the ground and ran forward to where Jessica's inert form rested in the grip of the feelers. He was thankful that she had been unconscious throughout the rescue. It was the work of a few seconds to strip off the clinging remnants of her captor's tentacles and lift her up to Julian who had taken his place at the panel opening. Swinging himself hurriedly aboard, he called to Ril for full speed. There was no telling how long the fused wall would hold.

The remaining length of passage was covered without incident, or even sight of other machines, but they emerged into the main traffic artery to find a different state of affairs. They had last seen it almost empty; now it was crowded. A number of mechanisms rushed at them with antagonistic intent and were promptly rayed before they reached a dangerous distance. Following them were others, but by no means all the machines in sight were concerned in the attack. The majority continued peacefully to go about their appointed tasks.

Either the alarm had not been intended for all, or else it had been cut short before it became general. Whatever the cause, the result was a great jostling and tangling of machines at cross purposes. The attackers were obstructed and hindered at every turn by the instinctive way in which the others pursued their routine work.

Ril, quick to perceive their advantage in the turmoil of the two inflexible orders, steered to one side and jostled into the stream of outgoing vehicles. The whole procession moved at a steady, uniform speed and they were swept along with it. The attackers, unable to alter the instinctive march, were left with no course but to follow in their wake at such points as they could contrive to wedge themselves into the moving queue. Roy looked round over the moving ranks and realized that they were safe, barring accidents, until the open should be reached.

Within the metal shell Julian was doing his best to restore Jessica to consciousness and looking with anger at the great weals imprinted on her arms and legs. When her abductor was caught, it had evidently closed its grip the more firmly in a determination not to lose its prey, and she had fainted from the constriction. At last her eyes opened and she looked up at him.

"What's happened?" she asked, attempting to move her stiffened limbs. He explained.

"And Roy?"

At the sound of her voice, Roy withdrew from his observation post and walked forward in the crouched attitude that the cramped quarters demanded. He took one of her hands in both of his and gazed down into her smiling face.

"Thank God you're safe, Jessica. Until that thing snatched you away, I didn't realize——"  
Jessica's eyes were starry.

"You didn't realize what, Roy?"

"I didn't realize how much I——"

“Heat rays ready,” interrupted Ril. “We’re nearly out.”

“Oh, damn!” muttered Roy as he sprang back to his station.

In the open, Ril gave the machine full power and sent it tearing away from the main body. Presently the pursuers also drew clear and came scudding in swift chase. Roy picked off the leaders with sharp blasts of heat, but every second more and more of the machines pouring out of the mountain entrance were joining the hunting pack. It became no longer a straggling pursuit, but a solid block of shining mechanisms bearing down. Had the way ahead been clear, possibly they could have held their own in the matter of speed, but, once in the forest, the superior control and the familiarity of the insects with their own machines, began to tell. Roy, with a ray tube in each hand, thanked Providence that no ballistic weapons were known to the ants; he had his work cut out to pick off the advancing units.

“Ahead,” cried Ril.

## CHAPTER X

### Back Home

Roy whipped round to see a line of machines drawn across their path. A quick switch of the ray served to clear the way, but it also sent a patch of trees bursting into flame. Ril held on and plunged them through the gauntlet of fire. Something fell across Roy's shoulders and half wrenched him from his perch. He turned to find an insect machine racing alongside. It had pursued a parallel course, behind masking trees, and seized his momentary diversion of attention, to cut alongside.

He crooked one arm beneath the metal casing edge in an effort to resist the pull, but slowly he felt his muscles giving in beneath the relentless tugging. Desperately he wriggled the other arm in an attempt to bring the ray to bear. He was thankful that it had not occurred to the insects to snatch at the fast moving legs of the stolen machine.

The pull of the tentacle grew stronger, and he called loudly to the others. He felt a pair of arms clutch his legs. He ached painfully as the machine tightened its grip. Fingers grasped the ray tube from the arm he had crooked below, and Jessica thrust herself up beside him with the tube in her hand. Quick as thought the whole bunch of tentacles were shorn from their roots. Then, turning it downward, she fused the front legs. The fore end dropped suddenly and the attacker pitched back over front in a final, shattering somersault.

Roy disentangled himself from the wrapping feeler and, side by side with Jessica, went to work at clearing away the nearest of the pursuers. The rays flashed in a furious semi-circle, but the numbers of the enemies were constantly supplemented; it seemed that they must shortly be overcome by sheer, clogging weight of numbers.

"Hold tight, there! We've got to risk this," called Ril from below.

Roy glanced ahead and saw that they had again reached the river. Unfortunately, not at the same shallow spot as they had crossed before. This time, a steep bank must be descended and deeper water negotiated. It would be chancing too much to turn along the bank, for they had no means of telling how far their pursuers were spread out to either side.

The machine slithered down the bank and waded out. The water rose above the leg sockets, but it did not flow through the universal joints. It rose further—to within inches of the observation holes, then, thankfully, they felt the floor tilt up as the stream bed rose. On the farther bank, Roy called Ril to halt. The machines had not followed them. They had collected in a line, hesitant and unwilling to risk a wetting. It seemed that the fugitives were safe. Then, just as Roy drew a breath of relief, one, more intrepid than the rest, came sliding down. Instantly he rayed it and a burst of steam arose from the water around. But the necessary lead had been given. A second later, half a dozen or more were slithering into the water. With no compunction, he played his ray upon them. He hoped by example to stop them from making a mass attack for it would be impossible to check all the hundreds which now lined the bank. But as he vaporized the last of the waders, an interruption occurred. Something came swinging above their heads and landed with a crash on the opposite bank.

"The red stalkers!" cried Jessica, "they're attacking them. Quickly, Ril, get into the trees. They haven't seen us yet."

They scuttered from the danger zone. Under cover of the branches, they stopped and looked back. Indescribable confusion was raging among the machines and at first it was

difficult to see the reason. But, as they watched, a net of glittering red metal came sailing through the air and fell upon the white machines. Evidently the red stalkers used rocks only against isolated enemies; when they really went into action, they had other weapons. One net followed another, and with every move they made, the white machines became more hopelessly entangled. From being a collection of perfectly controlled units they soon changed into no more than a writhing mass of a myriad glittering parts, surging frantically this way and that, enmeshing themselves the more as they struggled to escape.

Roy caught a glimpse of the first red biped striding forward, metal nets swinging from its jointed arms.

“Time for us to go,” he said.

Ril threw in the switch and they scurried away into the green obscurity of the forest.

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An unexpected sight greeted them at the cliffs. Del’s time traveler, constructed for safety within the cave, had been brought out and lowered to the ground. The other five members of the party were clustered round it, apparently in conference over some knotty point. One of the “Numen” let out a cry as they broke from the trees. Jim Hollis swung round with ready weapon. Roy hailed him loudly and the other’s face broke into a grin. A moment later the machine came to a halt in the middle of a congratulatory group. The greetings over, Roy asked:

“Why have you brought the traveler down here? Either an ant machine or a red stalker may come along any minute. One stone landing on that would ruin all your work.”

Del explained. It was necessary that the traveler be somehow conveyed to the cliff top. A break, less than a mile away, offered ample possibility for men to climb, but the problem of raising the machine appeared hard to solve.

“But why lift it at all?—Why not work it here?”

“Look at the cliffs,” said Del.

“Well, what about them?”

“They’ve been caused by some earth fault and are very recent. If we were to work the machine here, we would probably finish in the part of the cliff now fallen away—the result of that I leave to your imagination.”

Roy looked thoughtful. “I hadn’t thought of that danger,” he admitted.

“Nor did many others—or else they risked it as we did. Many travelers must have been built in the past. I wonder how many of their unfortunate occupants reached this year at the bottom of new seas, entombed in mountains, or even high above ground level. It is nothing less than miraculous that we few survived.”

Roy gazed dubiously at the cagework in which all their hopes were centered. His expression cleared; turning to Ril, he asked:

“Couldn’t the machine carry it?”

Ril was doubtful. Since the traveler had to contain the whole party, it was far heavier and larger than its forerunners.

“We can try,” he said with little conviction.

Edging their captured ant machine close, he wound the four tentacles firmly around the traveler and carefully drew back the lifting lever. The burden lurched slightly, but it did not rise; instead, the white machine tilted forward, its back legs in the air.

“Too heavy in the bows,” Jim Hollis remarked. “Let’s see if we can bring her stern down.”

The combined weights of himself, Roy and the two “Numen,” perched at the extreme rear served effectively to change the balance. The traveler was lifted clear of the ground. Very cautiously and slowly, Ril set the legs in motion, and the machine with its load moved unsteadily forward.

Progress to the break in the line of cliffs was slow, but slower still was the tedious climb to the top. Again and again it was necessary to assist the slipping legs of the machine, and to give purchase to scrambling metal claws. Nevertheless their admiration for the adaptability of the machine rose as it overcame successive obstacles, forging patiently and relentlessly up the rough way. All nine of the castaways became increasingly jubilant as the top was neared, even the two “Numen” being caught up in the prevailing high spirits, and wearing grins of pleasure.

As they scrambled at last over the sky line, Roy looked back in triumph at the way they had come. But the sight which met him sent the joy from his face. He called out and pointed below. Ant machines were scuttling from the trees in a silver stream, racing for the gap.

A few yards more and they were upon level ground where the traveler could be set down. Assured of its safety, he and Jim leaped down and ran back to the brink to meet the attack. Already the leaders were half way up the rough scramble before a fanning of rays sent them tumbling back on their fellows. Unencumbered as they were, they could climb with astonishing agility. And, as ever, they seemed careless of their casualties.

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Once the first rush was checked, it became an easy matter for the two men to hold them back. Jim Hollis made a grimace of distaste.

“How long do we keep this up?” he asked. “It’s nothing but a slaughter—even if they are only insects.”

Roy glanced back over his shoulder. He could see that Del was already in the traveler, intently setting his controls.

“Not long now. Just until Del gets it all fixed,” he returned.

An alarmed cry broke from Jessica. She was standing, pointing along the cliff edge where five red stalkers were advancing with deliberate strides. Roy gasped, for he could see that their jointed arms held nets, ready for use. He heard Ril call to him, and saw that the dwarf was manoeuvring the captured ant craft to face the new danger.

“Your ray tube,” Ril cried as Roy joined him. “Hold it up in front.”

Wonderingly he obeyed. Ril wrapped a tentacle about the tube and set the appendage swaying slowly from left to right. A red metal net came flying towards them. It fell only a few yards short. Swiftly Ril flicked over a lever which would set the machine marching towards the red stalkers. Then he jumped clear. Roy caught him as he fell, and, together they ran for the time traveler.

The entrance snapped to, and through the trellised sides of the cage Roy took his last sight of the fantastic world. In front, a swarm of silver machines had reached the cliff top and was pouring over the edge. Away to the right marched their capture, mechanically raying at the red giants. One had already fallen, to go hurtling below, but even as the leg was shorn from another, a metal net settled about the lone attacker. A glimpse he had of another red net, sailing through the air towards themselves. Then Del pushed over the switch.

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Roy and Jessica stood in the darkness. Beside them was the traveler. Of the original nine, it now contained only two. Ril and Kal had been returned to the year 10,424, and with them

had stayed the two “Numen.” Julian had regained his world of 3920, and now they rested at 2200.

“You’re determined not to stay?” Roy asked Jim Hollis.

“I am. Twentieth century is where I belong—even if it is a bit over-civilized for me. Say,” he added, “I wonder what they’re goin’ to say back there when I spin ’em this yarn.”

“They won’t believe you.”

“Maybe not, but I’ll try it.”

The final farewells were exchanged. The entrance closed, and Del set off to deliver his last passenger before he returned to his own future age. Before the eyes of the two, the cage blurred and then, suddenly, was not.

A green streak cut the sky.

“That means we’re home,” said Jessica. “It was the Asia-bound rocket.”

“Home,” Roy echoed.

“And we’ll never leave it again?”

“Never again.” Roy meant the words as he said them. But somewhere at the back of his mind was a hankering, and that hankering would grow.

What civilization, for instance, had preceded the ants? What manner of creatures drove the red stalkers? And, above all, what had happened to mankind?

THE END

[The end of *Wanderers of Time* by John Wyndham]