

# THE PETRIFIED PLANET

BY  
VARGO  
STATTEN



A SCION SCIENTIFIC NOVEL

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# *PETRIFIED PLANET*

By

**John Russell Fearn**

Writing under the pseudonym *Vargo Statten*.

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## CHAPTER ONE

The space projectile was moving with stupendous speed, winging out of the mighty gulf of space towards the planet Venus, drawn by that planet's attraction. It was the close of an ill-starred but immensely courageous journey. Within the hurtling flyer a young man and woman lay prone on the floor, unconscious, their air supply regulators blocked. They had covered 60-million miles of space to meet destruction.

Venus swept nearer, sunlight blazing back from her eternal clouds. Venus, world of mystery, forever defying the telescopes of Earthlings. Venus, demurely shrouded, her surface always covered by the dense atmospheric blanket.

When Peter Carton and his wife Ada had left Earth they had known full well they were taking their lives in their hands. But there was no other way in which to prove that space travel was possible. Between them, both being scientists, they had conceived this rocket-flyer and, with all the exuberance of true pioneers, had made Venus—not the Moon—their target. They had stayed conscious long enough to see that Venus was ahead of them as a shining star—then the air-supply system had gone back on them. Now they lay, their goal whirling up to meet them.

The projectile was flashing down towards the brilliant world. With a screaming roar it struck the atmosphere and began to glow with the tremendous heat. Faster—screaming—Down—down—down— A titanic concussion and a spout of water which soared half a mile in the steaming air. Red-hot plates cracked in the abrupt immersion. Water gushed through the fissures. The journey to Venus was ended—in a vast ocean in the midst of a temperature soaring to 180 degrees Fahrenheit.

Peter and Ada were not conscious of any of these happenings. But they were not dead. Their limp bodies had absorbed the shock of arrival; the ocean had cushioned the blow. No, they were not dead but, by normal standards, they were severely injured. Their bones were broken, their nervous systems wrenched out of position. On Earth they would have been beyond all hope of recovery.

The Venusian ocean only poured into the vessel's interior whilst it plunged downwards, then as it bobbed to the surface and lay rocking the water ceased to enter. The man and woman lay sprawled in a corner, blood-streaked and smashed. They knew nothing of the strange wingless projectiles which presently came out of the northern Venusian sky. They did not see the soft, furry beings who brought their machine down to the ocean surface and then investigated the queer fallen projectile.

With infinite care the Venusians transported their charges back whence they had come, to an almost fabulous looking city of green stone to the north of the planet, a city in the midst of mighty forests and sweltering in Venus's terrific day temperature.

There came a time when Peter Carton opened his eyes slowly and looked directly at a creature who reminded him of a large upright bee. He was covered in fine, delicate fur, had antennae jutting from his smooth head, and two very human-looking eyes. He was not alone. Other similar creatures were grouped about him, and in the background there loomed a wilderness of scientific instruments.

Peter Carton realised gradually that he was lying flat on his back on the most comfortable bed he had ever known. He felt luxurious, inexplicably exhilarated, at peace with the

Universe. Then came memories—of failing air, of choking lungs, of watching Ada crumple and smother before his eyes. He began to speak.

“Where—where am I? Where is my wife?”

The answer did not come in words; it came by telepathy, and it seemed a reasonable assumption to Peter that the transmission was made by means of the queer antennae on the foremost being’s head.

“You are on Atrima, my friend. And so is the female who was with you. Wife? Wife? That would seem to be interpreted as mate.”

“Correct,” Peter whispered. “Atrima? Where’s Atrima?”

There was a momentary hesitation in the response; then:

“This world, friend, is second from the central luminary.”

“Venus!” Peter began to sit up quickly. “Venus! We—we actually got here! You are *Venusians*? I—I mean, this place——”

“We are inhabitants of this planet,” the furry one assented. “You, if your mind is being correctly read, have come from the third planet from the central luminary—the world of Bilaz.”

“We call it Earth,” Peter answered. He was looking about him anxiously, across the great warm spaces of the gigantic room with its queerly designed furniture and scientific instruments. Then he looked back sharply to the furry one.

“Where is my wife?”

In response the being turned and apparently made some kind of communication to one of his colleagues. The creature hurried away and vanished through an adjoining doorway. Before long he returned and Peter gave a cry of joy as he saw Ada walking beside the creature. She moved swiftly, unaccustomedly, as though not quite sure whether or not her legs would support her.

Peter, as he got to his feet, thought he understood why she walked so strangely. He, too, now he had risen, felt oddly different. His arms and legs had the sensation of not belonging to him. They obeyed his will, but with noticeable effort. He moved clumsily, catching Ada in his arms as she came to him.

Their delight at being re-united was the only thing that counted for the moment, then gradually they became conscious of other things. They looked at each other intently, puzzling over the fact that in each case their features had changed. Their noses and mouths were a different shape, and even their eyes had altered colour. Ada had had blue eyes: now they were grey, and larger than before. Her hair was black where formerly it had been auburn. She, too, was remarking the fact that Peter had grey eyes also instead of brown ones, and his hair, though it was no different in colour, was much further back on his forehead.

There were also other differences. Ada did not appear as rounded as she had been: there were crude angles on her hips and shoulders. Peter for his part was mysteriously taller by a couple of inches and his chest development was considerably greater than it had been.

“What—what has happened to us?” Ada asked at last, in fearful wonder. “Why are we so different? Who are these people?”

“Venusians. Apparently they are friendly enough. We got here, and in one piece . . . I think.” Perplexity settled on Peter’s face. He turned and looked at the leading furry one.

“Your thoughts express your bewilderment,” the furry one said.

“Not to be wondered at, is it? We’re *different*, somehow!”

“Yes indeed. You lost your former bodies.”

Peter stared blankly and Ada gripped his arm.

“What does he mean—?” she asked, her voice low. “I remember I seemed to recover from unconsciousness in the next room there—but I had my body. I *still* have it!”

Then she became silent again, aware once more of those subtle differences in stature. Like Peter she knew in some way that she was not accustomed to the body she was using. It was as awkward as a new shoe.

“From all surgical standards you were both shattered,” the furry one explained. “The only advantage was that you still lived. Your hearts were functioning slowly and your circulation was still operating—but you were both blind and deaf. The central nervous system had been shattered and every one of your bones was smashed to jelly by the terrific force of your arrival on this world—which arrival we saw and mistook for a giant meteor. So, we brought you to our surgeries and removed the two organisms within you which still lived—the brain and the heart. Around those organisms we built fresh bodies of synthetic material, the nearest approach our world can offer to the flesh-and-bone you normally possessed. Every part of you is new, and synthetic, except brain and heart . . .”

“You mean we were re-modelled as easily as *that*?” Ada gasped.

Again the hesitation as thoughts were evidently co-ordinated by the strange being.

“Apparently,” came his telepathic response, “you come from a world where surgery is not yet a perfected art. With us, it achieved perfection many cycles ago. We gave you new bodies because we are anxious to exchange information with you. That could not have been done had you died. We, of course, understand space travel and have studied your world fairly closely—even to the extent of our machines being called ‘flying saucers’.”

“So *you* and your race were in the flying saucers?” Peter asked in surprise. “But that happened twenty years ago and you haven’t been seen in our skies since.”

“Only because our studies were complete and we withdrew. Please understand, we are friends, not conquerors. We seek only to pursue our own sciences and wish no ill to the denizens of any planet.”

The tension, unavoidable with two alien races meeting face to face, began to relax. It was dawning on Peter and Ada by stages that they had accomplished the incredible feat of crossing 60-million miles of space, had been nearly killed, and now were healthy and alive again in synthetic bodies. It gave them a rising admiration for the skill—and friendliness—of the beings amongst whom they now found themselves.

“You must stay as our guests whilst you become used to your new bodies,” the furry one decided. “During that period your space machine will be overhauled and the air-supply trouble corrected—since I gather that is what caused you to lose control . . . You must see our planet and our accomplishments, and we in turn will be glad to discuss with you any subject you can mention. We will withhold nothing. We are scientists, and so are you.”

Peter smiled, and then held out his hand. It was seized by the furry one’s queer appendage and in that moment friendship between Earth and Venus was assured.

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In the main hall of the Scientific Institute in London a convention was in progress. It was probably one of the most important meetings of the century, specially mustered so that Dr. Adam Latham could demonstrate his latest offering to the onward march of science—the Electronic Brain.

The hall, holding five thousand people, was packed to the doors. Three quarters of the assembly was comprised of scientists from all countries. The remaining quarter was made up

of the general public, reporters, television and movie engineers, and commercial giants anxious to discover if the Electronic Brain could help them to make more money with less effort.

At the moment Dr. Adam Latham sat lost in thought between the President of the Institute and the Secretary. He was a small-statured man of middle-age, completely untidy and oblivious. He even looked as though he had forgotten to shave. He was, in all respects, the typical absent-minded scientist as opposed to the spruce keenly intelligent men usually at the head of scientific affairs. Not that anybody would have wished to point out to the eminent Doctor that he looked a mess. Tidied up, he probably would not have been recognised.

Behind the assembly on the dais stood the cause of the meeting—the Electronic Brain. It stood eight feet high and was quite the most incredible gadget ever devised by the brain of man. It was the outcome of years of work on Latham's part and represented the best qualities of all the smaller Electronic Brains which had existed in previous years.

Presently, as a hush settled over the assembly, the President rose to his feet—pompous, high-pressured, full of the assurance of his position.

"Ladies and gentlemen, fellow scientists, and delegates." He cleared his throat and smiled benignly. "We are assembled here to-night to pay due honour to Dr. Adam Latham, one of the foremost scientists of our time, and also to see for ourselves the latest product of his fertile brain. The conception of an Electronic Brain, a thinking machine, is not of course a new one. There have been many forms of thinking machines in the past few years, most of which stemmed from the original adding machines—but here, in this monster of intricacy, we have, I think, one of the greatest advancements of our time . . . Ladies and gentlemen, Dr. Latham."

There was a roar of applause from the assembly and the President re-seated himself. The applause died away. Dr. Latham still sat in silence, scowling at the floor. Then as he was nudged he gave a start and blinked about him.

"Up to you, Doctor," the President murmured.

"Eh? What is? Oh! What about the introduction?"

"I have just given it," the President said, smiling between his teeth.

"You have? Hmmm—I never heard you." Latham rose and buttoned his untidy jacket. Then he unbuttoned it again and turned to his Electronic Brain. Everybody waited, out of sheer respect for his genius. That he ignored the entire assembly was quite typical of him.

Finally, after checking over the weird creation, he turned. His high-pitched voice made the television engineers wince and glance at each other.

"Naturally, I expect scepticism," he stated flatly, his pointed little chin projecting. "I expect to be laughed out of this hall because anybody who brings something new to the ranks of science is always hailed as a crank, a lunatic, or at the very least an eccentric. Alexander Bell had it to tolerate, so did Edison, Lister, Pasteur, and others. I expect it, too. Why? Because I am stating here and now that the Electronic Brain can *reason*."

There was dead silence. If there was scepticism at all it only showed in the faint sneer on the faces of one or two of the delegates.

"Reason," Latham repeated. "We have always regarded that as an abstract sense limited to human beings. I have proved otherwise. Give this Electronic Brain any problem—*any* problem! and it will reason out the solution."

The silence became broken now by the scientific critics. They kept bobbing up in different places, ignoring the pounding of the President's gavel and making their own particular

demands upon the famous Doctor's knowledge. Small though he was he breathed defiance and spat back the answers.

"Give us proof of your statement," insisted the French representative. "What, for instance, would this super-brain make of the infinite calculus? What is the infinite calculus?"

Latham gave a grim smile. "If you are prepared to sit here for several days whilst the E.B. works it out, I can promise you the answer! I did not say what length of time is taken for this apparatus to work out a problem: I only said it could be done. And it can. You have to remember that it is composed of intricate radio parts, to say nothing of nearly four thousand valves and two hundred transformers. Every problem takes a certain time to work out and no answer to a problem can ever be given immediately."

"Switch it on and let us see if it can solve less complicated things than the calculus," somebody suggested.

"Very well," Latham shrugged, and crossed over to the switchboard. He moved the master-control and then stood back and surveyed his creation proudly. Its multiple banks of valves were glowing warmly. Two big circular globes on its summit gave it the illusion of having eyes.

"What is the distance of Earth from the sun?" called one of the scientists.

There was a whir and a click, then everybody jumped a little as the equipment gave an answer in a gravelly, deep bass voice: "Ninety-three million miles."

"The voice puzzles you?" Latham asked, with a contemptuous smile. "I assure you I am not a ventriloquist. Every conceivable word in the English language is drawn on a self-selecting sound-track. I drew the words myself, as can any man versed in sound electronics. When answering, the equipment selects the words it requires and they are repeated through a track-scanner—just as an automatic telephone selects required numbers."

"How many variations has the numeral Nine?" demanded the U.S.A. representative.

Latham hesitated and gave a troubled glance at his machine. It seemed to be labouring a little as this new question smote its audio-brain. Then it began to click with bewildering rhythm and queer symbols popped up in little windows. One almost got the impression it was breathing heavily.

"Better mop its forehead," suggested a reporter laconically.

"Fool!" Latham roared at him. "You sit there in your dark ignorance and fling insults at this masterpiece. Hold your tongue and give it a chance!"

And suddenly the Electronic Brain started speaking.

"Nine is the number of cabalistic Hebrew power; it is the trinity of trinities in the Christian faith, the Greek number of Perfection and the Sanscrit superlative of superlatives . . ."

Pause. The President looked at the secretary and murmured, "Think of that!"

"Nine," boomed the automaton, "is the last of the digits and the highest number expressible in one digit. It is the number which cannot be repressed. When used in mathematical calculation it is bound to appear in the answer. Take the nine digits—one, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine and add them across. You get forty-five. And four plus five equals nine. Take any number, reverse it and deduct from the larger number, the result will always be divisible by nine. The difference between such two numbers is always a multiple of nine. Subtract four six seven from seven six four and you have two nine seven. And two nine seven divided by nine equals thirty-three, which——"

Latham snapped a button and glared. "This becomes childish!" he declared. "I did not invent this Electronic Brain for it to wrestle with such nonsensical problems. I built it to solve



the intricacies of science, of numbers, of engineering. I built it to probe into the uttermost mysteries where the mind of man cannot reach.”

“Like the infinite calculus?” persisted the French representative.

“If you wish it—or maybe the melting point of the inner core of the stars; the exact distance from the centre of the Universe to the outer rim . . .” Latham paused for a moment and some of his truculence gave place to earnestness. He made a movement which was almost dramatic as he appealed to his vast audience.

“Ladies and gentlemen, you cannot treat a discovery like this with levity! I claim no personal credit, my sole interest being the furtherance of science, but I *do* expect the E.B. to take its place in the ranks of great scientific instruments. Give it one sensible question, please—one profound and yet important question which none of us has yet been able to solve.”

There was a long pause whilst everybody thought hard. Latham switched on the receptor current again and waited—then the U.S. representative called out, “What is *Time*?”

The valves brightened; the clicking sounded like castanets. Slender rods started gliding up and down in oil baths and actuated objects deep within the thing. Every part was working overtime to root out the answer to the question. Latham gave the apparatus an anxious glance.

“It will not produce an answer to your question, my friend, until many hours have passed. It has to pass through all the stages of the problem and at the best I cannot see it discovering a solution before this time to-morrow evening. Obviously we cannot wait that long, so——”

“Just a moment!” the U.S. representative called, as Latham reached out to the main switch. “Are you intending to shut the thing off, Doctor?”

“Certainly. We can’t stay here until this time to-morrow night.”

“We can’t—but *it* can. What’s to stop it going on working the problem out? We’ll all gather again to-morrow night to hear the answer . . . Or are you afraid it can’t handle the problem?”

“Who’s afraid?” Latham demanded. “The E.B. can solve any problem in existence! I’m convinced of it. But you don’t suggest I leave valuable equipment like this working on its own do you?”

“You can stay with it all night. It’s your baby!”

Latham breathed hard, but did not make any response. He lowered his hand from the switch and looked at the glowing, clicking enigma as it still convulsed its weird innards to solve the problem of Time.

“Ladies and gentlemen, I think it is for me to decide this issue,” the President said, quelling the sudden wave of conversation. “There are obviously sceptics present, just as Dr. Latham anticipated. The only way they can be confounded is for this machine to find the answer posed for it. You are quite sure, Dr. Latham, that it will be this time to-morrow night before the Brain nears a solution?”

“Quite sure. The processes involved will take at least that much time——”

“Very well then. We will bring this meeting to a close and assemble here to-morrow evening to hear the E.B.’s findings. Until that time it will continue working, uninterrupted. You will appreciate, Doctor, that there is no other way in which it can prove its efficiency?”

“And if somebody steals it in the night?” Latham demanded.

The President gave a faint smile. “It is hardly an object anybody could steal, Doctor—standing eight feet high and weighing nearly half a ton. I hardly think you have anything to fear in that direction.”

“I refuse to do it!” Latham declared flatly. “I don’t trust *anybody*, and certainly not in this hall which is by no means a problem to break into. I am quite prepared to believe that certain scientific factions would go to any length to steal it . . . On the other hand, I realise that it must continue to run in order to prove itself. My suggestion is that it be manhandled into the basement laboratory under this hall. It can be securely locked in, there to continue working. The doors of the basement laboratories are electric and no thief would ever be able to break in.”

“Very well,” the President agreed, shrugging. “You are entitled to take every precaution you wish. You will switch it in to the mains down there, I take it?”

“To the mains?” Latham repeated, disgusted. “Great heavens, do you imagine this apparatus works from an ordinary power line like a— a television set? No; it uses atomic force and has inexhaustible power. It is entirely self-contained.”

Decision having been reached he turned to the machine and switched it off in the midst of its enigmatic postulations. Then he signalled a small army of attendants and, supervising the entire procedure, saw the delicate equipment carefully removed to the enormous deep basement under the building where, in the ordinary way, research was carried on—and could still *be* carried on even in the event of sudden war.

“Yes, I suppose that will have to do,” Latham sighed, as the President and secretary came to view the apparatus in action again. “I would stay with it personally only I have very important work to get finished and I know it is safe enough here.”

“The night watchmen have full instructions to be alert,” the President said, with his big-hearted smile.

“Hmmm—they’d better be. Wouldn’t trust ’em a yard, personally. They probably play chess and drink coffee all night.”

Disgruntled, Latham turned to the door and the President and secretary followed him. The door itself locked with an electric control and could not be opened until nine the following morning. With that Latham seemed satisfied—and, alone in its glory, the Electronic Brain clicked on steadily, working out the answer to the eternal riddle—What is Time?

## CHAPTER TWO

Minnie Carstairs entered her room hurriedly and closed the door. Then she locked it and stood for a moment breathing hard, casting a fearful glance about her. Light, flashing from a neon sign across the street, gave her intermittent glimpses of the dressing-table, wardrobe, bed, and very ordinary furniture. She was safe enough. The room was as empty as it always was—the drab little place to which she retired when nothing further of interest presented itself outside.

Still breathing heavily she switched on the light and then crossed to the dressing-table. She pulled off her coat and threw it to one side, then inspected herself in the mirror. She was good-looking and knew it. Straight-featured, blonde, with blue eyes that had said come-hither to more men than she could remember—until she had done it once too often to Nick Charters. He'd taken it seriously. Too seriously. This very night she had only just escaped with her life.

But she was safe here, in her own room, hidden in Soho. Nick did not know where she lived, unless he'd been smart enough to have her watched. Minnie glanced at her watch—a present from Nick—and it said 11.30. She ought to think about going to bed yet somehow had not the nerve. So she lighted a cigarette and in her mind's eye went back over the events of the evening.

She had met Nick as usual after her day's work as a waitress in a slick cafe. He had become too pressing, had even flown into a rage when he had guessed she was really doing nothing more than just stringing him along for all she could get— Then she had run for it, through alley-ways and streets, fleeing from a retribution which only his own greed had brought about.

And now? She didn't know. It all depended on whether Nick knew where she lived. If so he was the possessive type of man who would follow her here and finish his argument. He might even kill her, so sure was he that no woman could double-cross him and get away with it.

Minnie shifted position uneasily and crushed out her cigarette. Remembering the window blind was not drawn she went over to it and began to pull on the cord. Then she hesitated, her arm still upraised, her eyes fixed on the street below. For just a moment, in the dim lighting, she had seen a figure moving towards this building where her room was situated.

It was Nick. No doubt of it. She knew that queer, half-slouching walk and the slope of the shoulders. Her heart began to beat more rapidly. Opening the window hurriedly she peered below: no escape down there—a sheer drop. So she withdrew into the room again and looked about her in panic. There just was nowhere where she could hide without being found.

She spun round at a knock on the door. It was gentle but firm.

“Better let me in, Minnie, case I make a scene you'll never forget!”

It was Nick's soft voice, gentle as a child's, giving no hint of the killer that lay within his soul. Minnie backed to the further wall and there stopped, her shoulders pressed hard against it, her hands palm flat on the faded wallpaper.

“Okay, Minnie, you asked for it,” Nick said—then suddenly there was a tremendous impact as his foot crashed against the flimsy door. It flew open, snapped from the lock, and Nick stood on the threshold, his right foot still out-thrust.

“What’s going on here?” demanded a powerful Cockney woman’s voice. “Or don’t y’know this is a respectable house?”

“All right, Ma, just an argument,” Nick soothed her, glancing back down the narrow passage. “Sorry I bust the door. I’ll pay for it.”

“You’d better! An’ men ain’t allowed on these premises so y’can get moving!”

“I will, Ma, but not just yet. Now get going!” Nick spat suddenly, and whipped an automatic from his pocket. To Minnie’s ears there came the sound of her landlady’s swift retreat, then with a hard grin on his lean face Nick came into the room, shutting the door with a back-heeled kick.

“Get out of here,” Minnie whispered, her eyes wide. “Get out before I yell for help.”

Nick’s grin remained. “Yell all you like, Minnie. You’ll not do it for long with a bullet in that fancy carcass of yours. And don’t make any mistake, either. I came here for one reason only—to finish you. You’ve cost me a good deal of money in the time I’ve known you, then when I asked for a little return—as any man’s entitled to—what did you do? You spat like a wildcat, hit me across the face, and left me standing.” Nick shook his head slowly, his face masked by the shadow of his soft hat. “I don’t like your sort, Minnie: they’re better dead.”

Minnie still remained hard pressed against the wall, her shapely body seeming even more rounded through the strain it was enduring. Nick eyed her, taut, his automatic level.

“I expect there are plenty of mugs you’ve led up the primrose path in your young life, Minnie,” he continued, “and I am the last of them. You’re going no further. I’m going to kill you and if I’m caught, as maybe I shall be, it won’t matter much because I’ve two other murders to explain away, too. You didn’t know that, did you? You shouldn’t make a pass at a killer, Minnie—too dangerous.”

Minnie didn’t speak. Her eyes were fixed on the cold blue of the automatic’s muzzle. And, abruptly, Nick fired straight for her heart—

And at exactly this same moment, 11.40 p.m., Tuesday, March 9th, the Three Flying Daredevils were rehearsing a high trapeze act. The normal evening show was over, but there was a much more complicated routine to be worked out and a late private rehearsal in the empty circus arena seemed the only answer. To the girl aerial artiste everything seemed normal and the routine exactly as it should be. Her muscular partner, too, was satisfied with the proceedings. But the third member of the party knew something as he sailed high on the trapeze, grinning to himself.

The ropes of the lower trapeze were rotten with acid. In a moment or two the gentleman with the muscles, now swinging the girl through space in a dizzying triple somersault, would plunge downward to that trapeze. It would snap and he would crash some two hundred feet to the arena floor. If the impact did not kill him it would certainly incapacitate him—so the second partner went on smiling and wiped his hands in readiness for his own part in the act.

Finally the moment came. The girl finished a somersault and landed perfectly on her trapeze. The muscular one shot downwards and gripped the lower trapeze. The third flew through space—and at the identical moment the chief watchman in the Scientific Institute scratched his head and listened outside the electrically-locked door of No. 1. Laboratory Basement.

There were odd sounds coming from within, like the wailing of a distant wind. There was a relentless clicking, too, and the whirr and thresh of intricate cogs forming convolutions and mathematical formulae never even dreamed of in the mind of man. The night watchman could

feel queer forces bending around him and his scalp crawled. Finally he pulled out his watch and looked at it. It was 11.40 p.m.

At which same time Henry J. Johnson, a tired business man, was refreshing himself by studying the scantily clad chorines of the Half Moon Cabaret. Henry J. had his drink before him on the table. A little in front and above him on the stage the girls were in the midst of their routine, a delectable vision of frothy laces and white flesh. Henry J. winked at the girl third from the end and the big clock showed 11.40.

It was also 11.40 for Miss Honoria Simpkins of Maida Vale, a middle-aged spinster sitting in a bed-sitting room which had an antiquarian flavour. Miss Honoria had a face like a hatchet and her throat was wrapped up in red flannel. Her feet were in a mustard bath and she was half way to a mighty sneeze. In a word, Miss Honoria had all the symptoms of influenza . . .

And at 11.40 exactly something happened. It flashed in an ever-widening circle from the locked laboratory-basement where the Electronic Brain was working relentlessly on the problem of Time. It had the appearance of a rippling wave, somehow invisible and yet, paradoxically, in full view. The night watchman saw it distinctly. It came upon him as he reached the corner of the illuminated passage which led from the underground. For a moment he felt as if he were looking at the world through a curved, perfectly transparent bottle. His brain, never very active anyway, rippled with configurations and mathematical symbols. Pressures, strains, stresses, and dimensions all went to work on him— Then the expanding circle flashed outwards from the Institute in an ever widening wave.

It was as if a stone had been hurled into the atmosphere in the very centre of London and the atmosphere had rippled back, first in a big wave, then in smaller ones. In a matter of seconds the whole globe was encompassed and, after that, the wave, gradually dissipating, spread out into the depths of space and ceased to be.

Something mighty, something momentous, had happened. Yet, unless it had been seen during its inception, it left no clue behind. To Peter Carton and Ada, for instance, nearly at the close of their return trip from Venus, there did not appear to be anything unusually wrong with Earth as they approached it. They only gained their first hint of something not-as-it-should-be when Peter failed to get any radio response to his persistent signals.

"I just don't understand it," he declared, scratching his head. "Not a single flicker of response!"

Ada glanced at him from the navigation charts. Then she frowned as she looked towards the mighty green Earth towards which they were dropping.

"Can't be because we're too far away," she responded. "We are within a million miles of Earth's surface, well within the range of the short-wave receivers."

"I know. But look at the reaction meters——!"

Peter motioned to them. They were all at zero. Not a spark of response was coming through.

"Are you sure *our* instruments are not at fault? After all, the Venusians did the repair work and maybe they are not too well up in our type of engineering."

Peter shook his head. "Everything's perfect: in fact a good deal more perfect than we made it ourselves. No, the trouble is with Earth." He sighed. "Here I had expected a rousing welcome for the great thing we've done, and we can't even get landing instructions!"

He settled back in the control chair in disgust, leaving the radio equipment on open power just in case anything came through. But there was not a sound. Which was more than strange since on the outward journey the strains of radio programmes had followed the two travellers

for a distance of nearly three million miles before they had at last moved out of range. And now this . . . Not a babble of stations hurling music and international insults at one another. Silence. Absolute silence.

Ada moved back to her charts, then presently gave herself up to studying Earth as it grew visibly larger. After a while she asked a question, her tone obviously puzzled.

“I think there’s something wrong with my eyes, or is the Earth not revolving?”

“What?” Peter stared at her blankly, then down at the great world below. For a long time he did not say anything. Normally, when viewed from this distance, Earth should have revealed its rotation by one landscape disappearing as another came into view—a slow, almost imperceptible process, certainly, but definitely there. Yet, though Peter watched for nearly four minutes, until his eyes began to ache with the strain, he was prepared to swear that revolution had ceased. Not by a fraction had the landscape slipped out of sight or new landscape come into being. And there was something else. The clouds remained in position, too, which was utterly beyond reason since they normally changed every few seconds, driven by wind current.

“Well?” Ada asked at last, her grey eyes startled.

“Maybe—maybe an optical illusion,” Peter said.

“The dead radio isn’t an optical illusion.”

“True,” Peter agreed, baffled—and went on looking at the Earth.

Gradually, as the vessel swept nearer, the amazing truth was confirmed. Earth was *not* revolving. The landscape was just as it had been for nearly an hour, unchanged, with the clouds in the same position.

“I don’t know what we’re getting into,” Peter said, as he brought the vessel to the edge of the stratosphere, “but it looks as though something mighty strange has happened whilst we have been away—unless these synthetic bodies we’ve got are making us see things differently.”

Ada did not answer because she just could not think of anything worth saying. She remained at the window, peering below as the vessel entered the atmosphere and began to sweep down towards the great London air-park from which the original take-off had been made. It was a most disappointing return after such a mighty journey. No radio welcomes, no directions, no cheering crowds, no anything. Just the ever-expanding area of the airport with its numberless ’planes of all shapes and designs lined up for service.

Then the machine had come into the shadow cast by the Earth and was dropping through night. The air-park below was as clearly lighted as if by day, every detail visible, but no mechanics came running to greet the fliers. There was a disturbing atmosphere of utter deadness.

“Queerest set-up I’ve ever struck,” Peter kept muttering. “I don’t know whether to be scared or not.”

“I *am*,” Ada said. “It’s—uncanny!”

The space projectile under perfect control, Peter brought it down at last on the floodlit expanse of tarmac and then switched off the power plant. He peered outside into the glare of lights. It was quite incomprehensible why, now the space machine had landed, there was not a seething activity around it—mechanics and service engineers at least, to say nothing of inquisitive thousands.

“There’s something wrong with our clock,” Ada said, looking intently towards the executive buildings at the edge of the great park. “Our chronometer registers ten in the

morning. The clock over there says twenty to twelve, and I don't have to tell you it's night, not day. How in sanity did we ever go so far wrong in our calculations?"

Peter shook his head in bewilderment, and got to his feet.

"From the look of things," he said, "one would imagine that everything out there is dead. Not a soul has— My God!" he broke off, astounded, and stood staring through the window.

"What?" Ada looked intently, then back at him.

"That flag on the top of the Executive Building! Look at it!"

Ada looked, and gave a start. The flag, at the summit of a sixty-foot pole, was almost a landmark. It came to a point and bore the insignia of W.A.C. upon it—World Airline Corporation. But the amazing thing about it was that it was half curled as though the wind had caught it, and it *remained* like that—a corrugated flag, out-thrust, and defying the law of gravity and action of the wind.

"It's frozen!" Ada ejaculated.

"Can't be! Dammit, Ada, this is March, not January! We'd better see what in hell's gone wrong."

Peter began moving. He unfastened the airlock screws and swung open the huge operculum. Then, on the threshold of the lock he stood motionless for a moment with Ada right behind him.

"Listen," Peter whispered, his face awed.

"To—to what?" Ada began to feel her scalp crawling. "I can't hear anything . . ."

"That's just it!"

Ada understood at that moment what Peter meant. The world outside was utterly, terrifyingly quiet. The roar of the city, the din of 'planes twenty-four hours a day, was muted. Not a whisper, not a breath of wind. Just a silence as absolute as the great void itself.

When Ada spoke at last she spoke in a whisper, because she felt she had to.

"Pete, I'm scared—honest I am! Let's get out—back into space. Even Venus would be better than this. We can *hear* things and see people move and——"

"Take it easy, old girl," Peter murmured, putting an arm about her. "I agree with you that a homecoming like this is enough to send you off in a blind panic, but we've *got* to look into it. We *must*. Some incredible catastrophe has happened whilst we've been away and by sheer chance we missed it. We have returned with the opportunity to investigate, and it's time we started. Come on."

Ada had little alternative since Peter jumped down to the tarmac outside. He helped her descend and they looked about them in the floodlit glare. Finally they began to move in the direction of the Executive Building, the vast edifice containing all the booking rooms, waiting rooms, cafes, lounges, and all the amenities of a great airport terminal. As they went, their footfalls echoing weirdly in the silence, Ada kept her eye on the brightly illuminated giant clock.

"It's stopped," she said at length. "Still twenty minutes to twelve."

Peter nodded, glancing about him. Then he glanced at his own wrist watch. It registered ten past ten and was ticking normally. Only it should have been ten past ten in the morning. A vague, terrible thought crossed his mind and he pushed it on one side.

Finally he and Ada gained the Executive Building, entering it through the wide-open doors. Once beyond them they stopped dead. If they had been surprised before they were now utterly stunned. They were looking upon the inconceivable.

They had come into the main Customs Declaration department. It was brilliantly lighted and filled with men, women and children either departing on a journey or coming from one—but not one of them was moving! The whole vast, brightly coloured scene was nothing less than a stereoscopic photograph, arrested in mid-movement.

“Great heavens!” Peter whispered at last, his face blank, and Ada’s hand tightened on his arm.

They summoned up courage to move forward, amidst the completely motionless people. They had been caught in all manner of attitudes. One prosperous-looking business man was in the middle of a stride towards the Customs barrier and stood poised on one leg, the other out-thrust in readiness for the next stride. There he remained, defying the law of gravity and as rigid as a statue.

There were numberless incredible little vignettes. There was a florid woman at the barrier holding up an intimate garment and glaring fixedly at an embarrassed-looking clerk, and neither of them blinked or moved. There was a little boy in the very act of banging his sister on the head. The girl, unaware of the coming blow, was gazing blissfully into space. The boy stood with arm upraised, his hand a fraction from the top of her head. Frozen. Dead.

The big clock, the counterpart of the one outside, was motionless, still at 11.40. And everywhere was this eternal silence and people caught in the very instant of performing an action. Gradually, for Ada and Peter, the terror of it all relaxed and instead they became fascinated.

And, presently, in the enormous adjoining lounge, they came upon even more amazing scenes. There was a waiter in the very act of pouring a drink for a saucy-looking young lady. The young lady was smiling up at him coyly, as flawlessly modelled as if in wax. The drink was half-way to the glass from the bottle and remained there against all natural law. More incredible still was the case of the young man lighting a cigarette. The cigarette projected from his lips and his eyes were screwed up against the flame. In his hand the lighter was burning, the flame bright and motionless, the pale blue smoke of the petrol petrified into a thin wisp above it.

“Have—have we gone crazy, or what?” Ada asked at last, gazing around her. “I can’t stand much more of this. All these people looking and yet not seeing. All dead.”

“I’m not so sure they *are* dead,” Peter said slowly, and he moved to the waiter in the act of pouring the drink. Reaching out his hand Peter snapped his fingers in front of the man’s face. He remained just as before, his unblinking eyes on the drink.

Peter hesitated, thinking, then he pulled a long pencil from his pocket and prodded it at the liquid which was uncannily suspended half-way to the glass. The moment he did that there was a queer buzzing note and then a click. Surprised, Peter looked at the stump of pencil left in his hand. The rest of it had been sheared off as though with a knife.

“Good job I didn’t use my fingers,” he commented. “Force or something is in the way, arresting all movement. If not force, then a warping of space, or something.”

“Can’t be,” Ada replied, after a moment’s thought. “If that were so we wouldn’t be able to walk on the floor. It would blast our feet off.”

“No. The floor is stationary and not in the process of movement. I know there is a movement, even in a solid object, the back and forth ebb of molecules—but it is not movement in the sense that this falling drink is movement. Mmmm—this gets interesting. Let’s see now.”



He considered for a while and then took out his penknife and snapped open the long main blade. Very gently he prodded the point towards the waiter. At the moment the steel touched the man there was a faint hissing note. Instantly Peter snatched the knife back and examined the blade carefully. It had been blackened by some inexplicable force but had not been smashed or truncated.

“What do you make of it?” Ada questioned presently.

“At the moment I can only hazard a guess, but it seems that varying degrees of movement have different force values. That is to say an object in the process of *rapid* movement, like this drink from the bottle, has a tremendous resistance field, but an object in a lesser state of movement, like the waiter in mid-action, has a lower resistance. Presumably an object which is standing still would have no resistance at all. It might even be possible to handle it.”

“All very nice and scientific,” Ada said, “but what on earth has *happened*? That’s what I want to know! What conceivable catastrophe has stopped everybody and everything in mid tracks?”

Peter was silent for a long time, looking about him; then at last he shrugged.

“I don’t know,” he confessed, simply. “Plainly it has something to do with time, and whatever it was seems to have happened at eleven-forty, since that is the time at which all clocks—or these two big ones in the Executive Building anyway—are frozen. Time is—just standing still.”

The utter paradox seemed to be emphasised by the motionless flame of the young man with the lighter, by the drink which was half-way between bottle and glass. No waxworks, no matter how ingenious, had ever created anything as uncanny as this.

“Do you think, perhaps, that this has happened all over the world?” Ada asked finally, her voice subdued. “Does it mean that you and I, of all the teeming millions to which we once belonged, are the only survivors?”

“It begins to look horribly like it. Remember, we noticed that the Earth was not revolving, so it seems the whole world is included.”

“And what a host of scientific riddles it brings in its train!” Ada gave a sigh and glanced behind her at an empty chair. Very carefully she reached out her hand towards it. She sensed the very faintest tingling sensation, but that was all. Finally she took a risk and seated herself. Immediately the tingling covered her entire body, but it was not strong enough to cause real discomfort.

“As I thought,” Peter said, considering her. “Motionless objects offer hardly any resistance. The resistance must be caused by a state of—er—non-Time.”

“Clear as mud,” Ada said wearily. “What do we *do*?”

Peter was silent, scratching the back of his head.

“If the Earth is not revolving,” Ada continued, “it will remain dark indefinitely. The Sun has a certain motion of its own, of course, but too slow to bring daylight before a very long time has elapsed. And that brings another point. Is the sun involved in this, too?”

“I’ve no idea. It didn’t look any different from space. And certainly everything was normal when we left Venus. Of course we don’t know when this business began. We don’t know *which* eleven-forty is referred to——”

“Soon find that out.” Ada got quickly to her feet. “There must be a calendar in the Customs department.”

She moved quickly through the midst of the dummy-like men and women. After perhaps five minutes she came back, her expression showing she was making some mental

calculations.

“The calendar says March ninth,” she said. “And that means it happened about—— No, it *was* two nights ago by normal time. We must have been about thirty million miles away in space when all this took place, and yet nothing happened to us.”

“Mmmm,” Peter acknowledged. “Which tells us something. Whatever caused this paradox did not travel very far into space otherwise we would have been involved in it as well. Since *we* were not, at thirty million miles distance, then the Sun certainly would not be at ninety-three million miles. Nor would any of the planets. Moon would, probably. Have to check on that. Come to think of it it *did* seem to stay at the half phase for an extraordinary length of time. It too is probably frozen at a fixed instant.”

“To these people,” Ada said slowly, “to-morrow—or rather March tenth—has never happened. Yet by normal ratio it is two days behind us. We are living in normal ratio, but they are not. How come that two different states exist side by side? Oughtn’t we to have frozen into immobility the moment we came in range of this—this whatever-it-is?”

“Possibly.” Peter was nearly scowling with concentration. “Must be some reason why we and our space machine are outside these conditions—unless the something which caused this condition has now exhausted itself and has no influence over—er—late-comers, like ourselves. Oh, *I* don’t know! I don’t even know where to begin looking.”

“We *have* to look, Peter. We’re probably the only people alive on the face of the Earth and it’s up to us.”

Ada became a little awed by her own statement and gave a startled glance about her. The silence was oppressive. Not a man or woman had moved a fraction. The weird tableau of the lounge was unaltered.

“Earth has stopped revolving, yet gravity remains the same,” Ada resumed, after a moment. “Ought not gravity to be involved in this as well? In fact, ought not everything to fly *off* the Earth, like it did in Wells’ ‘Man Who Worked Miracles’?”

“The force of gravity is exactly counterbalanced by the centrifugal force,” Peter answered. “Gravity, as such, does not really exist. It is *not* a force, but an etheric warp, as any scientist will tell you. It exists in non-Time out in space so that is presumably why it still exists here even though Time itself seems to have stopped. As for everything flying off the Earth, how could it without a period of Time in which to do it?”

“I—I don’t get it,” Ada said.

“You should as a scientist. No incident whatever, great or small, no movement whatever, can take place without occupying a forward movement of Time in which to do it. If Time is not there and is a motionless Now, then nothing *can* move. You can never move in space without also moving in Time, and as the two are interlocked the stoppage of one involves the stoppage of the other.”

“Oh,” Ada acknowledged, mystified. “Then, since we can move about oughtn’t *we* to be flung into space?”

“Why should we be? Gravity is holding us and operating as normally as ever. The stress produced by centrifugal force is also operative, only not progressive. It is frozen into a fixed instant. So, apparently, we move about normally.”

“Yes,” Ada mused, “I think I see your point, involved though it is. It also still leaves a lot to be explained—and in particular why it is that we remain ‘unfrozen’ in the midst of all this—— Anyway, that will have to wait. Don’t you think the best move would be to see how the rest of the world has fared? We’ve got the space machine, thank heaven, as a means of travel.”

Peter nodded. “Good idea. We’ll be on our way.”

He took Ada’s arm and they went out of the silent edifice on tip-toe. Why, they did not know. It was just a natural consequence of this great, silent world in which they found themselves.

## CHAPTER THREE

In a matter of perhaps fifteen minutes Peter had the space machine in the air at a height of about eight hundred feet, its normal jet-motors—as opposed to the atomic rockets—in operation. Accordingly the machine swept through the darkness at four hundred miles an hour, the two remaining at the window and gazing below. Their survey only served to deepen the immense sense of mystery with which they were blanketed.

Lights blazed below at intervals as they passed over towns north of London. From the navigational charts, and the solitary airplane beacons, they identified Bedford, Northampton, Leicester and Sheffield. There was nothing to show but what a perfectly normal night was existing below, had it not been for the haunting realisation that they were observing lights which had been in being at 11.40 p.m. on Tuesday, March 9th, and had therefore remained fixed at that one instant. Presumably they saw the one light wave of that instant, and nothing else.

Drawn on by the uncanny fascination of it all Peter kept the projectile on its northward course. In time it passed over brilliantly lighted Leeds, then veered slightly westward and headed for the Lake District and Scottish Highlands. Here and there in the vast, dark void below there was a solitary glow from cottage windows, and that was all.

The great cities of Edinburgh and Glasgow looked entirely normal, until Peter descended from the heights and, slowing the projectile to a crawl, he and Ada studied the streets laid out below. They were filled with motionless traffic and equally motionless human beings. Night life in these cities had stopped in its tracks as completely as it had everywhere else. With a sense of deepening horror at the weird fatality which had stricken the Earth and its peoples Peter drove onward again, leaving the British Isles behind and turning due West across the Atlantic. After flying for an hour at 500 m.p.h. Ada looked up sharply from her study of the darkness.

“It’s getting lighter,” she said, her eyes brightening. “I do believe the Sun’s rising! That means the Earth hasn’t stopped revolving after all!”

Peter shook his head gloomily. “If that were so, we would be moving faster than the revolution of the Earth, otherwise we couldn’t catch up with the Sun! The eastern United States, where we are heading now, are five hours behind British time, remember. *Behind!* So how on earth could we catch up with the daylight?”

Ada became silent again, but her gaze remained fixed outside. And she had been correct in her statement, too. It *was* becoming lighter. By imperceptible degrees as the flyer hurtled on the dark became grey, and the grey became daylight—and with it came an astounding vision.

“Just look at that ocean!” Ada gasped.

Peter was already doing so and trying to decide where he had ever seen anything like it before. In the still increasing daylight the ocean resembled the surface of a mighty glass marble, its surface reflecting the sky in a deep green shade and its enormous Atlantic rollers fixed permanently. It made a picture of huge troughs and peaks reaching out immovably to the furthest horizon. In the midst of it, as though glued down, were transatlantic liners, caught in the very act of progress and there fixed.

“It’s uncanny!” Ada whispered. “It’s horrible, in fact!”

Peter was about to answer, then instead a brilliant sickle appearing over the western horizon arrested his attention. In amazement he gazed at it, narrowing his eyes as it came further into view with the projectile's onrush. It was the Sun, the same old Sun, pouring forth warmth and light from a cloudless sky.

"Now we *know* Earth isn't revolving," Peter muttered. "The Sun never rises in the west. It means we have caught up with the point where night ends and day begins. On this part of Earth it is eternal day, just as back home it is eternal night."

The Sun climbed imperceptibly as the projectile still flew onwards towards the United States across that astounding, motionless ocean. By the time America's tall spires came into view the Sun had climbed half-way to the zenith but was hidden in immovable clouds. In New York it appeared to be a somewhat drab March evening.

And, once again, there was the frozen immobility of a perpetual Now over the great American metropolis. Elevators were halted in mid-tracks; traffic was motionless; the dots of people hurrying about their day's business were poised in mid-movement. One giant clock swept by on a lofty tower as Peter crawled the projectile over Manhattan. The clock said 6.40.

"Then it happened here at exactly the same time as back home," Peter said, looking back as the clock on its tower swept into distance. "Whatever it was that caused all this must have operated instantly, or at least with such a slight time-lag it isn't noticeable. Something moving at the speed of light maybe which, for all practical purposes on a globe the size of Earth, is instantaneous."

"Are we going to land?" Ada questioned, but Peter shook his head.

"No thanks. London is awe-inspiring enough. I don't propose to take on New York as well. I'll just keep going and make a circumnavigation of the globe."

"Then I'll fix a meal. It's time we had one."

Ada turned away from the window, wearied by now with the eternal sameness of the external scene. She prepared a meal and she and Peter consumed it whilst, under automatic control, the vessel flashed onwards over the petrified Northern Pacific. All the time the Sun climbed, finally reaching a point directly overhead and then beginning to sink again as the machine flew away from it. There was no longer any doubt about it: Earth had stopped dead, and everything upon it.

So, onwards, back across China, Asia, Soviet Russia and Europe, into the darkness of night again and, at one point, the Moon was visible through the cloud canopy. It was at the half phase, just as it had been when viewed from space during the return from Venus. Peter looked at it and sighed.

"Affected like the Earth," he said. "Otherwise, by this time, it would be nearly full. I don't begin to grasp the dimmest meaning of all this. I can only think of some kind of cosmic catastrophe."

"I'm not so sure," Ada responded. She was seated at the control panel, peering into the night, her face pensive.

"Why not?"

"Well, surely, a cosmic catastrophe would not just limit itself to Earth? Earth is a small planet as planets go. I think every planet in the System would have been affected. We know for a fact that this business occurred within an area of thirty million miles."

"Then if not a cosmic catastrophe, what *did* happen?"

Ada was silent for a while. Then she said slowly, "Maybe a scientific experiment that went haywire. That's the only other answer."

“Big enough to encompass the globe and the Moon!”

“Why not? It might have got out of hand.”

“Might! Apparently it did—completely.”

There was silence again as both of them fished around in their minds for possible lines of thought. It demanded abstract reasoning, however, since they had no known premises from which to work. They were as utterly lost—more so in fact—as strangers in a foreign land.

By the time Peter had brought the machine down once more at the London air-park, which seemed to him the most sensible place to “park”, neither he nor Ada were any nearer a solution. They sat looking at each other helplessly, a little stunned by what they had seen. Outside, the corrugated flag was still projecting in the windless air and the lighted clock still pointed to 11.40.

“No two human beings were ever faced with a problem so gigantic and complex as this,” Ada said at last. “A perpetual Now: that is what we have come into. We have two choices: one is to fly back to Venus and make our lives with those furry, friendly beings and leave this enigma to scientists of a future time to solve, or else we stay and by every scientific theory we know, together with average intelligence, try and solve what did happen. If we can do that we might even . . . start things going again.”

“That would be something,” Peter admitted, with a tired smile. “I think we stay. We belong to this world and somehow I don’t like deserting it and leaving the problem unsolved. At least we’re in no danger. If we can once get used to the eternal silence and immobility we can stay here for years working on the problem. This ship has enough provisions to last for five or six years at least. We can live in it, make it our headquarters.”

“I’m with you,” Ada agreed quietly.

“Right then. To-morrow——” Peter checked himself and smiled ruefully. “I mean, after a sleep we’ll start investigating in earnest. We’ll walk through London and comb it to the depths if need be. We’ll find *some* clue to work on and after that—— Well, who knows? For the moment we need rest. We couldn’t think straight any more if we tried . . .”

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The two discovered that, according to their chronometer, they slept solidly for fifteen hours, a natural reaction of their journey through space and the incredible paradox in which they had become involved. But the sleep had done them good. They felt freshly alive to the situation and ready to do some hard thinking.

The view outside was unchanged. The same clock, the same flag, the same air of utter emptiness and the blanket of perpetual night.

Over breakfast the two worked out their plans.

“If this was a disaster caused by some scientific experiment the source of it might be anywhere in the world,” Peter said. “That’s an alarming thought. But, on the other hand, *before* it happened it is just possible that some news of it might have leaked out into the papers or something. My suggestion is that we try and find a newspaper somewhere for the evening of Tuesday, March ninth, the date when all this happened. In London here we’re in the right place to do it.”

“Entirely logical,” Ada assented—and so it was agreed.

After breakfast they set off, switching out the space flyer’s lights and leaving the self-charging atomic batteries to build themselves up. They walked across the air-park to its main gate, making their way through motionless traffic coming in and out of the big entrance way. The air was still completely without motion and, as far as things went, warm enough. In fact

the temperature was unvarying since it remained exactly at the degree obtaining at 11.40 on March 9th.

“Look,” Ada said, nodding. “Uncanny, isn’t it?”

Peter paused and gave a puzzled little smile. He was looking at blue exhaust fumes from one of the cars entering the park. The fumes hung like blue gossamer, as fixed as in a snapshot.

“We’ll get used to it,” he said. “At least I hope so.”

It was by no means easy to do so, however. To walk the streets towards the city centre was a completely unnerving experience. It meant passing waxlike men and women in the midst of walking, and there fixed. It meant passing through the midst of traffic mysteriously held at bay. And the effect was immensely enhanced when they reached the normally busy whirl of Piccadilly Circus. But now all that whirl had gone. Only the silence, the windless air, the hundreds of people in mid-stride, and the arrested traffic.

At the kerb edge Peter came to a stop with Ada beside him. He was looking at the illuminated signs. Some of them were complete; others were half-way to spelling out a word or slogan. Across the corner of one building an illuminated news strip had been halted. It read

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. . . *am convinced of E.B.’s power to reason*—

“Of all the queer news items I ever saw, that’s got them all licked!” Peter declared blankly. “Who’s the ‘Am’ referred to, I wonder? Who’s ‘E.B.’?”

Ada shrugged. “Don’t ask me. We’re looking for a newspaper, if we can find one.”

They crossed Piccadilly Circus, passing a motionless policeman with arm upraised against halted traffic, and entered Shaftesbury Avenue. Here, on the corner of Wardour Street, they came unexpectedly upon a newsvendor. He was leaning against a lamp-post, his newsposter curled permanently by a passing gust of wind. His eyes were fixed into distance and one hand held out a newspaper. The others were imprisoned under his left arm.

“Well?” Ada asked. “Do you risk taking that paper or will it take your fingers off?”

“I don’t know.” Peter thought for a moment. “It isn’t in the midst of rapid motion so maybe I can risk it.”

He did not perform the act immediately; instead he looked at the newsvendor’s poster. All it said was—*Atlantic ’Plane Crashes*, which could not have provided less clue to the amazing state of the world.

Finally Peter decided to take a risk. He touched the out-held newspaper and grasped it. There was a faint tingling which he ignored. With a sudden movement he pulled the paper free of the vendor’s grip and studied the front page, Ada looking over his shoulder. The headlines referred to the Atlantic ’plane crash, and the newspaper’s date was Tuesday, March 9th. In the top right hand corner were the red words—*Last Extra*.

“Last is right,” Peter muttered, scanning the front page, then he added, “You’d better grab another paper from under his arm, Ada. We’ll need to study these papers in detail.”

Ada nodded, dislodged one of the newspapers, and began reading it. Peter looked about him impatiently, then up at the street lamp.

“Can’t see here properly,” he said. “We’ll try that night club over there—*The Half Moon*. Looks comfortable.”

They went across the road together and walked past a statue of a commissionaire on the building steps. The doors, of the swing variety, had a peculiar thrilling sensation to offer as they were pushed, then Peter and Ada found themselves in the nightclub's interior. By this time they had become accustomed to the immobility of everything. It was no longer fascinating. Instead it had become a worrying mystery.

The place was fairly crowded, men and women in evening dress at the many tables, waiters hovering amongst them. Tobacco smoke hung motionless; it curled petrified from cigarettes and cigars. On the stage at the end of the big room a bevy of beauties was in the midst of a can-can, their legs upflung and motionless, laces caught in the act of being swept aside. At one of the nearer tables a prosperous-looking man was just winking at one of the chorines and she was winking back.

"Twenty to twelve," Peter murmured, nodding towards the clock. "Same old story— Well, let's see what we can get out of the newspapers."

He and Ada found empty chairs and, completely disregarding the setting into which they had come, they began to study each column of their particular newspaper carefully. They spent nearly an hour on the job, taking care not to miss anything, but they were no nearer when they had finished.

"Not the vaguest hint," Ada said at last, sighing. "Just ordinary news—nothing more." She frowned as she recalled the illuminated news sign. "Wonder who E.B. is?" she questioned.

"Don't ask me . . . The only thing we seem able to judge from this is that the catastrophe happened suddenly, without warning. Otherwise there would surely have been some hint. Nothing else for it but to get on the move again and see if something presents itself which sets our brains ticking . . ."

Peter got to his feet and looked about him, then with Ada preceding him he went outside again. For a moment or two they stood looking down the length of Shaftesbury Avenue.

"Might cut through to Charing Cross Road and then to Fleet Street," Ada suggested. "If there *is* any news to be had we might discover it in the newspaper offices themselves—on the teletape, amongst editorial notes, or somewhere."

Peter nodded and so they set off, marching through the eternal silence and passing the petrified men and women on the way. In one instance they walked past a group of revellers. It was queer to see them—three men and three women—in the midst of laughter and joyous movement, caught exactly as a camera might catch them.

"Suppose," Ada said, when the revellers had been left behind, "nothing ever comes to life any more. What then?"

"Presumably we shall die never knowing what really happened."

"But, Pete, have you thought for a moment what a terrible thing this really is? A whole planet stopped dead! I just can't begin to grasp it."

"Probably you never will." Peter seemed to have become tremendously philosophic. "The very enormity of the situation makes it impossible to absorb it. It's like trying to imagine infinity or multi-millions. You just can't."

"Do you think, perhaps, that decay may set in next? May all these bodies start mortifying?"

"Quite impossible. Mortification demands Time in which to take place. No Time, no mortification."

"I still don't quite see that."



Peter came to a stop and gave a patient smile. “Look,” he said, “you keep viewing matters as though Time is moving normally. It isn’t. That is, it isn’t for anybody except us. For some reason we are exempt, why, I don’t yet know. But for everybody else, and for every *thing*, Time no longer exists. As long as there is this eternal Now nothing can decay, move, or progress in the slightest. Nor can it retrogress. In effect there is Eternity. Keep it in your head that space and time are absolutely interdependent. Every movement carries one forward a certain distance in the Time dimension.”

“Yes,” Ada said, still wrestling with deep problems. “Yes, that’s true. Life, as Jeans once said, is made up of constant leaps from one second to the next.”

Peter was silent, his brow wrinkled. Ada looked at him curiously.

“One second to the next,” he repeated slowly. “Now I just *wonder* . . .”

“Wonder what?”

“Referring to Jeans again,” Peter continued. “Or maybe it was Eddington. I’m a bit rusty. Anyway, one of them posed a pretty problem once. Namely, what happens between one instant and the next?”

“But—but there isn’t a gap, is there?”

“There is, but not appreciable to the human senses. Take a movie film. Can you see the separation between one frame and another? No? The illusion is of continuous movement, yet there is really a distinct division between each frame in the film, each movement being distinct in itself. Just as a cartoon film is actually made up of thousands of separate drawings.”

“Well?” Ada questioned.

“Time is similar,” Peter continued, resuming walking very slowly. “It is *not* a continuous state. Science has said that over and again. Between every instant, between every millionth of a second, there is a brief non-time gap which we skip in our progress from one instant to the next. But suppose something happened to extend that non-Time gap indefinitely and made the next instant out of reach?”

“Now you’re swimming in deep water,” Ada protested.

“Not at all.” Peter’s eyes were commencing to gleam. “I think it is a highly logical possibility. In fact the *only* possibility. Look at it this way. Suppose that you wish to walk across a field and there stands in your way a small stream, over which you can easily stride without it interfering with your progress. Well, that would represent normal progress through time and the stream would be the non-Time gap which you would never even notice. *But*, suppose, as you began to stride over the stream some power or other widened it to a distance of several miles, and kept on widening it. What then? You would never reach its other side. The next instant, in other words, would be cut off from you. Your progress would be indefinitely arrested. That is what I believe has happened here. Everybody is stuck at exactly eleven-forty and the moment beyond that instant has gone out of reach.”

“But why has it?” Ada persisted.

“I still don’t know. But if scientific machines can deal with space and electronics and almost everything else, I don’t see why a scientific machine might not dabble with Time. Only a guess, and I’ve no idea if such a machine exists, but it’s as good a theory as any.”

“Then—then you mean, if a machine has *caused* this it has produced a gap so wide in Time that it can’t be bridged? Unless the gap can be closed again Time will never proceed normally as before?”

“Not for these people anyway. We missed the gap so we keep on going. I know,” Peter sighed, “that it’s all a dreadful puzzle, a maddening paradox, but anything in connection with

Time must be just that because of its very nature.”

For a long time he said no more, preferring to work out the problem in his own mind. So, presently, Fleet Street was gained. Here the traffic was thick, chiefly made up of newspaper vans, and the “frozen” figures of the workers connected with them. The offices of the great newspapers were ablaze with light from top to bottom—that one motionless light wave which had existed at 11.40 p.m., Tuesday, March 9th, and would continue to remain until this profound problem was solved.

“Try here,” Peter said, nodding to the offices of the *Evening Echo*. “It’s about the biggest evening paper in the city.”

He motioned Ada through the open doorway and they walked across the main entrance hall, filled with the now common sight of men and women workers stopped in mid-action. They mounted the stairs to the main newsroom on the first floor and here paused, surveying the men and women reporters at their various desks, the motionless copy-boys, the general atmosphere of tremendous industry petrified. The electric clock was pointing to 11.40, and the calendar said Tuesday, March 9th.

“This looks a bit more promising,” Peter said. “There may be *something* . . . You take that row of men and women to the left and see what they are writing about. I’ll take the right. Since eleven-forty stopped everything these folks were presumably getting out copy for the midnight edition of the *Echo*. It is the only newspaper which appears until the small hours of the morning.”

“*First with the latest*,” Ada acknowledged, quoting the paper’s slogan. “I know . . . Right—here we go.”

She began to follow out Peter’s instructions, carefully studying the typewritten sheets in the various machines, or the hand-written notes on the desks. Since the papers offered no resistance to being touched she picked them up and browsed through them.

She found little, however, of interest. The various news items were just tit-bits, and nothing more. There was no arresting statement about an impending world catastrophe, no hint as to a possible warp in Time, no——

“Hey!” Peter called suddenly, from the far end of the room. “Take a look at this!”

Ada looked up eagerly and hurried over to where Peter was standing. He was reading a type-written sheet which he had yanked from a man reporter’s machine. Ada read over his shoulder, her eyes widening with interest.

To-night, at the Scientific Institute Professor Adam Latham, the renowned scientific inventor, demonstrated his latest creation, the Electronic Brain. In general the machine gave a satisfactory performance, answering questions considered to be more or less routine scientific problems. It also gave an interesting exposition on the application of the numeral 9. A later experiment, too complicated to be completed on the spot, was postponed until to-morrow evening when——

At that moment, evidently, Time had stopped. Peter read the words again and then looked at Ada.

“Notice anything?” he asked quietly.

“Not particularly. An Electronic Brain isn’t anything very new, after all. They’ve been in existence for——”

“E.B.,” Peter interrupted. “Electronic Brain. I admit it may be coincidental, but I’m a drowning man clutching at a straw.”

Ada started. “Why, of course! You mean that sign we saw half completed— What did it say now? ‘Am convinced of E.B.’s power to reason—’ Sounds crazy to me. *Anybody* can reason: that is a natural gift.”

“Just so—which is why I think it refers to a machine or something, by which it is *unusual* for it to reason.” Peter snapped his fingers suddenly. “I have it! The ‘Am’ must have been the back half of ‘Latham’. Then it would read—‘Latham convinced of Electronic Brain’s power to reason’.”

Ada’s grey eyes went a little wider in surprise.

“Why yes, I believe that’s it!” she admitted. “Since the demonstration only took place that Tuesday evening, the information would comprise late news. But where is all this getting us? You don’t suppose an Electronic Brain could cause all this trouble, do you?”

“An ordinary one couldn’t, but if this one had the power to reason—as seems probable—it might have done just anything. A thinking machine has dangerous possibilities if it gets out of hand because it is completely infallible and completely inhuman.”

Silence. Peter put the typewritten copy down slowly. Then he came to a decision.

“We’d better go to the Scientific Institute and see if we can discover anything. I have the feeling we’re getting warmer.”

They left the newspaper offices hurriedly and went as quickly as possible through the Middle Temple to the Victoria Embankment, upon which the great edifice of the Scientific Institute stood. To their annoyance they found it in darkness, the massive copper-bronze doors solidly closed. Beaten for the moment they stood at the top of the six huge granite steps and considered what to do next.

“Might break in,” Ada suggested finally, after she had glanced towards the big windows of the main hall. “Nothing very difficult about it. Certainly nobody will stop us,” she finished dryly.

Peter immediately began moving, Ada beside him. They walked round the broad pathway to the nearest window and surveyed it. Peter picked up a chunk of the heavy rockery which formed the ornamental gardens in front of the building and felt nothing more than that faint resistant tingling. Taking aim he hurled the rock through the window and the cloying, ghastly silence of the petrified city was disturbed for a moment by the echo of the falling glass.

“Here we go,” Peter said, and advancing to the window he knocked out the remaining javelins of glass with his elbow and then climbed through into a gigantic hall. He helped Ada down after him and they surveyed in silence the scene dimly illuminated by the glow of lights from the Embankment outside.

“Debating chamber,” Peter said. “I’ve been here to meetings many a time. From the smell of it there’s been a meeting. The air’s thick, heavy, and unventilated. Motionless like everything else. It would be in here where Latham gave his demonstration, I suppose. Better take a look at the platform.”

They went to it and found it empty of everything save chairs. Disappointed, they glanced round the emptiness.

“Everything taken away,” Peter sighed. “We’re no nearer. No clue, no equipment. And I really thought we’d got something.”

“Only one other course then. Go to Dr. Latham’s home and see if his Electronic Brain is there. Evidently it must be since it isn’t here. We can soon get his address from the ’phone

directory.”

So they left again, entirely unaware that the E.B. was not a very great distance below the debating room platform. In the nearest telephone kiosk they found Latham’s home address—8, Chandos Crescent, so they set off together through the weird streets in the midst of the eternal night. By this time, though, they had grown so accustomed to the utter incredibility of everything they were no longer terrified. Instead they were keyed up with the anticipation of perhaps finding an answer to the riddle.

It was as they were passing through one of the streets in Soho, past a series of dreary-looking tenement houses, that Ada suddenly stopped and pointed above.

“What does that look like?” she asked.

Peter glanced upwards, then his gaze became fixed and he frowned. Against the lighted blind of one of the windows—two stories up—was the silhouette of a man in hat and overcoat, an automatic clearly visible in one of his hands. Like everything else he was completely immovable.

“What about it?” Peter asked. “Let’s get moving——”

“Just a minute, Peter. Something’s happening in that room, or was about to happen when Time stopped. It may only be amateur dramatics, but it may also be the real thing. It has only just occurred to me that the stopping of Time may have prevented quite a lot of criminal acts from being performed.”

“Very probably, but what has it to do with us?”

“Everything! We’re outside the situation. We might be able to prevent several tragedies being enacted when—and if—Time starts up again.”

Peter sighed. “Look, Ada, we’re in the midst of a world-wide problem and all you can think of is preventing certain actions from completing themselves——”

“And why not if murder is involved? I’m going to take a look what that man’s up to—or *would* have been up to.”

Peter looked his annoyance at the interruption in progress to Latham’s abode, but he followed Ada just the same. He felt he had to in case by some mischance he lost touch with her. To be left alone in this silent world would, he knew, soon have sent him crazy.

The doors of the tenement house were wide open and a dim glow was burning in the hall. At the base of the shabby staircase a massively built woman, probably the proprietress, was staring up the stairs, her eyes fixed and a look of alarm on her flabby features. Ada and Peter stole past her and kept on ascending until they reached the second floor. It was a niche of light down the edge of one of the doors which attracted them. They found it moved open freely as they touched it. Beyond, in the drab little room with its solitary electric light there was a scene that might have been a cover from a thriller magazine.

A girl in a close-fitting green dress was flattened hard against the wall, her terror-filled eyes staring at the man in soft hat and overcoat before her. She was good looking, extremely shapely, and obviously cornered. The most surprising thing of all was the jet of flame from the man’s automatic and a .32 bullet half-way between him and the girl, suspended as though by a magnet in mid-air. From the muzzle of the automatic, above the flame, there hung a plume of discharging smoke.

“Whew!” Peter whistled. “If ever a girl escaped death by inches it’s this one. That bullet is heading straight for her heart—arrested on its way when Time stopped.”

“And when Time resumes it will finish its course and she’ll die,” Ada said, evidently having made up her mind that at some period Time *would* resume. “Now do you see what I

mean about us being benefactors? There must be hundreds of instances like this—people about to be run over, about to be shot, about to suffer all kinds of things. It gives us the chance to help them. Give them a kind of second opportunity.”

“Mmmm, I see what you mean,” Peter admitted. “But I’ll wager we can’t touch that bullet. Its terrific velocity will give it a resistance fit to blow our arms off if we try.”

“I wasn’t thinking of touching it. The girl’s motionless, isn’t she? What’s to prevent us moving *her* out of harm’s way?”

Peter looked surprised, then he shrugged. He and Ada took hold of the girl between them, the first human being they had ever touched since coming into this timeless state. She radiated that strange tingling energy but otherwise her body was warm, though completely rigid. She might have been made of rock. With some difficulty she was placed on her back on the bed, her body and clothes “frozen” into exactly the same position as they had been when she had stood by the wall. Like a doll she lay there, her terrified eyes now staring unblinkingly at the ceiling.

“Warm,” Peter mused, looking at her. “Not abnormally so, but correct temperature. That is probably the case with everybody, which proves life is still there though suspended.”

Ada crossed to the dressing table and regardless of the “tingles” picked up the heavy brush tray. She took it over to the girl stiffly elongated on the bed and edged the brush tray between the rigid fingers.

“Give her a chance to do something if she suddenly recovers,” Ada explained. “She’s out of the way of the bullet. Come to think of it we might put this intruder at the other end of the passage. That *will* surprise him!”

Peter grinned for a moment and, as though carrying a wax figure to place in a shop window, he and Ada transported the gunman to the far end of the corridor and there left him standing, his cold eyes fixed on the faded opposite wall.

“Good deed for to-night,” Ada said, dusting her hands. “In between whiles I’m going to see if there are any more I can perform. Help to take my mind off things.”

“Don’t let it take it off too much,” Peter warned. “We’ve more on our plate than just saving unfortunates— And come on! We’ve got to get to Latham’s place.”

They hurried down the stairs and to the outdoors again. On their way to the scientist’s home they did not encounter any further incidents and so they finally found themselves at the queer Georgian-looking place which Latham inhabited—a piece of ancient London in the midst of newer buildings.

“We’ll break in,” Peter said. “Nothing else for it.”

He went to the front window and climbed to the sill, then with his foot he kicked out the glass. In a moment or two he and Ada were in the drawing-room. They crossed it in the gloom and emerged into the hall. A line of light under a door opposite to them led them towards it. The door “thrilled” Peter’s hand as he pushed it open. Beyond was a book-lined study. A solitary reading lamp gleamed on the desk. In the midst of making notes sat the famous scientist. He looked like an extremely life-like painting, his thoughtful eyes gazing into space, his hand poised to write further on the papers before him.

“He’s one man who *is* going to be annoyed if he ever wakes up,” Peter commented. “One of the most famous scientists in the world and he’s nailed down like the rest of them.”

Ada nodded and edged her way round to the desk to study the papers upon which Latham had been engaged. She realised after a second or two that there was no clue to be found in them. They appeared to deal with some kind of biological treatise.

“I’m going to look for his Electronic Brain,” Peter said. “Come on!”

## CHAPTER FOUR

An investigation of the house, however—in which it was quite impossible to try and switch on lights without receiving a smashing reactionary blow of energy—revealed no sign of the Electronic Brain. Nor was there any trace of it in the laboratory basement below the house. Finally Peter and Ada came back into the study, puzzled and worried once more.

“It must be *somewhere!*” Peter insisted.

“Since we can’t find it, maybe we can discover what it does,” Ada said. “Dr. Latham must surely have notes somewhere concerning it. We might learn something if we could but find them.”

So they began searching, and as luck had it—since the Doctor was using the study—they found every drawer unlocked ready for use. For nearly an hour they waded through all manner of scientific treatises, understanding some and baffled by others, until Ada finally unearthed a blueprint. Eagerly she spread it on the desk under the light.

“It’s it!” she exclaimed in excitement. “Look at the top—*Blueprint of Electronic Brain.*”

“Uh-huh,” Peter admitted. “But this is only the framework with no description of the innards! No use whatever. There must be something somewhere describing in engineering terms how the thing works.”

But there was not. Everywhere conceivable was searched, even down in the laboratory, but no plan came to light detailing how the Electronic Brain functioned. There was the possibility that, to guard against theft, Latham had lodged the secret with his bank.

“Outline of a framework, and that’s all!” Ada gave a disappointed sigh. “Oh, well, at least we——” She came to a stop and frowned.

“Well?” Peter asked, as she remained silent. “Found something?”

“Not exactly, but—— Look at the dimensions of this thing. Eight feet high and six feet wide, with a depth of four feet. Made of metal, too. Doesn’t give the weight, but with those dimensions it must be pretty heavy. Peter!” Ada looked up quickly. “I think we’re on the wrong track. The Doctor would never bring home an apparatus this big, especially if he had intended using it the following night. It’s in the Institute somewhere! Must be! There’s no other answer.”

“Yes, maybe you’re right. We didn’t look far enough. All right, we’ll rectify it straight away. We’ll put everything back as we found it first . . .”

This they did and then departed as they had entered, via the broken window. Once again they began their walk through the utterly silent streets, arriving back at the Institute half an hour later. As before, they entered it through the Debating Hall and here stood wondering what to do next.

“I don’t know anything about this building beyond this one particular room,” Peter confessed. “We’d better explore.”

So they began wandering through its endless rooms and council chambers, and failed to discover that which they sought. Inevitably they came at last to the staircase leading below. In the brightly lighted depths they passed first one watchman, in the act of lighting his pipe—and then at the corner of a corridor came upon another. He was looking at his watch and his fingers were halted as they scratched the back of his neck. He looked profoundly puzzled.

Peter studied him, then looked at the watch. It was registering 11.40—the same as all other accurate timepieces.

“Just why did this old boy look so baffled and consult his watch?” Peter asked, thinking. “Had he got some hint of something peculiar, do you imagine?”

“Maybe. I could tell you better if we could only find that confounded Electronic Brain.”

They moved on once more, looking at the closed doors of the basement repositories, or at least that was what they took them for. Being unfamiliar with the edifice they had no idea that several of the rooms beyond the doors were laboratories. Peter tried each door in turn and every one was solidly locked. Struck with a thought he went back to the night watchmen and searched each one for keys. There were none.

“Well, we’ve covered the whole building,” Peter sighed, as he returned to the end of the corridor where Ada was standing pondering. “If the E.B. *is* in this place it must be locked up behind here somewhere.”

“Probably is,” Ada responded. “Be just the place for safe keeping. I was just thinking—— Do you suppose we could smash these doors open somehow?”

Peter considered them for a moment and then slowly shook his head.

“I doubt it. They’re immensely solid, and from the look of these locks I’d say they’re electrical, similar to those in a bank strong-room.”

Ada did not say anything further. There was a sense of stalemate, a feeling of having come to the very edge of discovering something only to be cheated.

“I believe,” Peter said at last, “that I have an idea! A demonstration as important as Latham’s must have been televised during the proceedings.”

“Highly probable, but we can’t possibly capture any of the scenes which took place.”

“*We* can’t, but what about the Venusians?”

Ada looked puzzled, so Peter added, “We know from what they showed us when we were on Venus that they can quite easily pick up all television programmes from Earth: their instruments are capable of it. Not only that: they *re-record* all those sights and sounds and file them away for further study. We are just like specimens to them, remember. They are still building up facts concerning us. It is more than possible that they recorded and viewed everything Latham did, particularly with him being a scientist with something new to offer.”

Ada snapped her fingers. “It’s a great idea! We might be able to find out what really happened—or at least gain a clue. What are we waiting for?”

Leaving, had they but known it, the door behind which the Electronic Brain stood in arrested motion, they hurried from the building and returned across the silent, petrified city to their space machine. It was a genuine relief to both of them to shut the airlock and send the projectile hurtling out into the void away from the weirdness of the stricken Earth.

They had a meal, surveyed the Moon still at the half phase and in the same position, then looked towards Venus. There, at least, they hoped they would find life, movement, and exchange of views. They just could not get across space fast enough, building the power plant up to maximum load.

There followed the inevitable monotony of the trip across 60-million miles, each of them taking it in turns to sleep or watch the controls. Their secret fear that maybe Venus too had become involved in the general Time black-out was dispelled as, in nearing the planet, they received a directional beam on their instruments which guided them safely through the dense atmospheric blanket and finally to the city of green stone in the midst of the Venusian forests.



Contact with the furry one, who was the leader of his race, was simple to establish and, as on the earlier occasion, he was cordiality itself.

“This is a pleasure indeed, my friends,” came his telepathic greeting, as the two were shown into his private suite in the city’s heart. “Please rest yourselves. I will have refreshment brought immediately.”

Peter remained standing, too restless with his problem to relax—but Ada settled down on the low-built divan. The furry one remained at his desk, waiting.

“We returned to Earth, our home world, and ran into a most astounding mystery,” Peter said, halting. “It——”

“I know,” the Venusian’s thoughts interrupted. “You found your world and its satellite motionless, in a state of complete non-Time.”

Peter smiled ruefully. “I forgot. You have read my mind.”

“Not altogether. We naturally maintain an almost constant astronomical watch on your world—as we do on the others. We soon discovered that all activity on your planet had ceased and that it was not even rotating. At the same time we found that the normal constant flow of television and radio communication had stopped. A dead—or at least arrested—world.”

“The whole thing is uncanny!” Peter clenched his fists helplessly. “I’ve formed a few theories, and I think I know the cause. But I’m not *certain*. That is why I have come to you for help . . . Do I need to explain all we saw, or can you read it from my thoughts?”

“I have already read it, my friend. And please relax. No problem was ever overcome by racing the brain and body to excess.”

Peter sat down slowly beside Ada. The furry one became lost in thought and the refreshment had been brought, and consumed, before his telepathic communication came again.

“Plainly, the root cause of the whole paradox, Earthman, is this Electronic Brain.”

“Exactly my conviction,” Peter replied eagerly. “I have been trying to trace the apparatus but haven’t met with any success. We flew here specially to ask if you had chanced to pick up a television programme which relayed Dr. Latham’s demonstration.”

“Possibly we did since all Earth broadcasts in sound and vision are recorded and studied by us. I can soon ascertain for you.”

The Venusian pressed a button on his desk and another of the queer beings entered by the door. He received telepathic orders and retired again, presumably to investigate.

“Your science is ahead of ours,” Peter continued. “What do you think we ought to do to straighten matters out? It is quite impossible for Time to *remain* fixed.”

“Time, of all the sciences, is the most paradoxical, my friend. It involves so many things which seem entirely contradictory. I am afraid I can give you no advice in the matter until I know exactly what happened to bring the condition about. One thing *is* certain, as you yourself discovered earlier, and that is that gravity is not affected by this Timeless state. If it were, then all the planets in the System would have been thrown off balance when Earth stopped its movement and rotation. But then, as you are aware, gravity is not a force as such, but an etheric stress, and therefore is outside the limitations of a time-dimension.”

“If,” Peter said slowly, “I could only grasp some idea of what this Electronic Brain comprises I might build a new one and——” He shook his head dubiously. “No—forget it. It wouldn’t work out. An Electronic Brain isn’t a time machine when you’ve said and done all.”

There was an interruption as the Venusian servant returned. He came to the desk and issued his telepathic communication, then retired again. The furry one rose.

"It appears we did make a sound-and-vision record of the Latham transmission," he said. "If you will come with me you can study it for yourselves."

Peter and Ada promptly rose and followed the scientist from the chamber, down a long corridor, and then into one of the many immense laboratories scattered throughout the Venusian city. The glare of the Venusian day had been excluded by metal shutters across the windows. Upon one wall was a huge projection screen. Facing it, forty feet away, was the recording equipment ready threaded for action, a Venusian standing beside it.

The furry one motioned to the low built chairs and then raised his appendage in a signal. The lights dimmed to extinction and the transmission began.

"Ladies and gentlemen, fellow scientists and delegates . . ." The President rose and began his opening address, and from that moment onwards the action followed exactly the pattern which had existed in the Scientific Institute on that fated evening of March 9th. Peter and Ada sat motionless, absorbed, studying the huge Electronic Brain. They heard it give its exposition on the numeral 9, and then straightened in sudden interest as the U.S. representative called out, "What is *Time*?"

"Now we're getting at it," Peter murmured tensely. "To ask a question as profound as that of a thinking machine is just asking for trouble——"

He broke off as Latham continued speaking, explaining that the machine could not give an answer until many hours had passed. The back and forth argument was all there, ending in the President's suggestion that the instrument should be manhandled into the basement under the Debating Hall. At this point the television engineers stopped their activities since the meeting was no longer in being.

The lights glowed into life again in the Venusian laboratory and Peter sat in deep thought.

"Definitely," he said at last, looking up, "we have the cause of the whole trouble. It was that question—'What is Time?' which started it. If that Electronic Brain is as efficient as it seems to be it would root out every possible aspect relating to Time, and in the course of doing it would probably involve itself in dimensions and integrals concerning Time which no human brain could ever even conceive. Yes, that's it! In the course of its postulations it came to a point where it perhaps reasoned with Time itself and brought it to a standstill."

"There, Earthman, you are incorrect," the furry one commented, with his usual telepathic wave.

"I am? But—why am I?"

"The Electronic Brain, as I see it, did not reason with Time itself. That would be impossible, as impossible as an intelligent being like you or I telling the Sun to stand still. What really happened, I think, was that the Brain, in working out the problem, came to the place in its calculations where non-Time had to be considered. You know, of course, that Time is non-continuous? That there is a brief non-Time instant between one second and the next?"

Peter gave Ada a significant glance and then nodded.

"Very well then. When it came to resolving this non-Time state—an essential part of the calculations it was working out—the machine would automatically stop itself dead because it would have placed itself in a non-Time state in order to try and solve that condition. Much as a hypnotist, by looking through a mirror, might hypnotise himself into immobility."

"But that wouldn't stop everything else!" Ada objected.

"On the contrary, I think it would! This Brain, being atomic and possessed of inexhaustible energy, would be bound to influence the Time dimension when it obtruded its postulations and calculations into it, just as a machine will stop if a spanner be thrown into it.

The energy probings of the Brain were, I think, sufficient to jam the natural flow of Time as well as stop the Brain itself. If that seems difficult to grasp it is only because you find it hard to picture an abstract state like Time being blocked. Yet a wall can block a wind, which is also abstract, and a wall can block light, which is also abstract. In the same manner a wall of postulations and mathematical symbols, which of themselves have energy, could also block the movement of Time. That resulted in a dead standstill, everything—including the Brain—stopping dead at that point in the Brain's calculations."

There was no doubt that the furry one was talking from the lofty elevation of a super-scientist, but through the maze of exposition Peter could gather the drift. It prompted him to a logical question.

"How do we put the condition right?"

"I can see only one way. Find this Brain and set it in reverse. That should cause it to undo all its calculations and remove its barrier of mathematics from the Time-dimension. I do not propose to explain how you accomplish this, but it seems to be the only solution."

"I don't see how we can," Peter mused. "On Earth we cannot make anything go backward or forward. It is simply *frozen*."

"Not entirely. You have been able to move papers and doors, and you moved a woman and a man through space to different parts of a building, all of which involved moving them in Time. You encountered resistance, yes, but not a complete barrier. That suggests to me that the Time dimension is not *entirely* blocked, only partially. There remains a thin stream where there ought to be a river. I think you will find, if you can locate the Brain, that it will be possible to reverse it, or set its controls at zero. Whatever happens, it *must* be jolted out of its present state for as things stand its figures and calculations are forming a barrier—and paralysis has resulted. Break down that barrier in even the slightest degree and the situation should right itself."

"Some problem!" Peter commented, sighing.

"There is another aspect of all this which baffles me," Ada said. "And it has since the beginning. How is it that we can move about freely on Earth, and our space projectile too, whereas everything else has stopped?"

"The solution is simple, Earth woman. Both of you have not got Earth bodies any more. You were given synthetic bodies, you remember? Made of materials peculiar to this world. Each world has a different time ratio and, therefore, using Venusian material for your bodies you are impervious to the vagaries of Time ruling on Earth. The same can be said of your space projectile. It was so badly damaged practically seventy-five per cent of it is now rebuilt from Venusian material. You, and your vessel, are independent of the particular Time ruling on Earth."

"Will that do anything to us when Time resumes on Earth, if it ever does?" Ada asked.

"No. The variation of Time-ratio between worlds is very slight. It is not enough to cause any noticeable discomfort. In this case it has proven an advantage for it has enabled you to move freely in a world otherwise petrified."

Peter got to his feet, apparently having come to a decision.

"I don't have to tell you how grateful we are for your help," he said, looking at the furry one. "You've cleared up a lot of the things which were bothering us. There seems to be nothing else for it now but to return to Earth and find a way to get at the Electronic Brain and put it right. It's an odd thought, but at one point in our explorations we only had a door between us and it—and we didn't know!"

“And when we get back how much better off shall we be?” Ada asked, also rising. “The locks on those basement doors are electrical, from the look of them. That means there will be a terrific resistance if we try and break them open.”

“And explosive won’t work,” Peter muttered, frowning. “We get nothing at all out of electricity, force, explosives, or anything of that nature. They comprise the mostly fiercely resistant elements.”

“I think I can help you there,” came the Venusian’s thoughts. “Since materials on this planet are in a different time ratio *our* explosive might function correctly on your world. You must take some with you. It is of the fuse variety, but is extremely powerful, so use it sparingly.”

He led the way out of the laboratory and, before the return journey to Earth began, he saw to it that the necessary explosive, looking exactly like Earth dynamite, was provided. After which the farewells were taken and once more the rocket projectile climbed into the void to begin its 60-million mile hop back to the petrified planet.

“Maybe we’ll get somewhere this time,” Peter said, as he sat at the controls. “My only fear is that we may miscalculate with the explosive and perhaps blow the Brain clean to hell. If we do that, and Time still remains motionless when we’ve done it, our last chance has gone. Nothing will ever return to normal.”

“Pessimist!” Ada reproved him. “We’ll find a way.”

The point was not argued any further. Space had to be travelled and it demanded all their vigilance, each in turn, as the voyage across infinity continued. So, eventually, they came once again into the dark shadow of Earth and descended in the direction of London, settling down finally at the air-park once more, almost in the same spot as before.

“Nothing different,” Ada announced, looking through the window. “Still night, still eleven-forty by the clock, and the flag is still corrugated. And it is nine days now since March 9th. The normal date is March 18th and the time is three in the afternoon. Which raises another point. How are we going to explain to everybody where the interval of time has gone—when recovery is made, I mean?”

“That’s the least of our problems. Let’s get the business straightened first. Our job now is to see if we can blast open the door of that laboratory. Grab that explosive, will you?”

Ada obeyed and then followed Peter through the open airlock to the windless outdoors. They made their way together across the air-park, and thereafter their journey followed the now familiar pattern through the midst of dummy-like men and women and silent, halted traffic.

When they gained the Scientific Institute they entered it once more by the broken window and made their way into the basement regions. Everything was as it had been on the previous occasion before their 120-million mile journey to Venus and back.

“There are four doors along here,” Peter said, pausing. “Which one do we want, I wonder?”

“Only one answer to that—smash open each one and make sure. Come to think of it,” Ada said, as she watched Peter carefully fixing the explosive stick in position, “we might have tried to track down the key. The President would probably have one——”

“A bit late now to think of it,” Peter interrupted. “We’ll try this way and see what happens.”

Taking the fuse he trailed it back to a safe distance and then produced the matches he had brought from the space machine. To his satisfaction the fuse fizzed and sparkled immediately

the flame touched it.

“As impervious to Time conditions as we are,” he said. “And we’d better get back a bit. We’ve no idea how much power the explosive has got.”

With Ada he withdrew to the far end of the corridor and they watched with their arms partially upraised over their faces in readiness. Gradually the fuse spluttered to the end of its length—then came the explosion, infinitely more devastating than either Peter or Ada had expected. They were lifted from their feet by a terrific blast and hurled nearly a dozen yards down a side corridor. Dazed, they scrambled up again and looked at each other.

“What on earth did he give us?” Ada demanded. “A baby atom bomb?”

“Something mighty powerful anyway. We have to remember, though, that an explosion is reacting against a time barrier, therefore its force is probably infinitely greater than normal on that account . . . Let’s see what happened.”

They hurried back into the main passageway and discovered that the door of the first basement chamber had been blown clean off its hinges and hurled into the space beyond. And that was the tragedy of it.

Appalled, Peter and Ada stood on the threshold and looked at the smashed ruin of what had been a massive machine. Now it lay shattered, the immensely heavy door in its midst. In all directions metallic bars and struts had been hurled, to say nothing of a carpet of broken glass from valves and dial faces.

“Oh, no!” Peter groaned in dismay. “Not that! Don’t tell me we hit the right place first time and smashed the damned thing!”

Horried, he moved forward and inspected the ruin, glass cracking under his feet. Ada gazed with him, then at last she sighed heavily.

“It’s it,” she said. “Or *was* it. Don’t you recognise the outline from that blueprint we saw? Absolutely wrecked!”

“We’re—we’re beaten,” he said, turning a blank gaze to Ada. “That’s what this means, Ada! Time has not started up again with the wreck of this machine—and now it never will.”

Ada did not dare say what she was thinking so she became practical instead. She seized hold of the “tingling” door and dragged it to one side, but all this did was to expose in greater ruin the remains of the Electronic Brain.

“If we knew how it was built we could start all over again,” she said, thinking.

“*If* we knew!” Peter glared at her in impatience. “Talk sense, can’t you? We don’t know a thing about the Brain, and we certainly never shall now!”

“Just a minute, Peter. We’ve learned something from this occurrence, or maybe I’m more brightly scientific than you are for a change.”

“I’m listening. What have we learned?”

“That the Timeless state was created by this machine and then became an established, independent fact—otherwise when the machine was destroyed, Time would have shot back to normal. In other words the Brain created a condition which even the destruction of the Brain has not altered. From that it begins to look as though our Venusian friend’s theory was right: that the machine produced a state of affairs which also stopped the machine itself. Therefore, only a rebuilt machine, forced to work in reverse, can undo the condition which has been brought about.”

“Very interesting,” Peter said, rather sourly. “All we have to do is rebuild the Brain, not knowing one connection from another. How *can* we?”

“We find the blueprints which describe it in detail.”

“You’ve evidently forgotten that we’ve already tooth-combed Dr. Latham’s residence and not found anything.”

“I haven’t forgotten; but I am convinced he must have a blueprint *somewhere*. The very fact that he intended to hand his Brain machine to the ranks of science makes that a necessity, otherwise how could engineers build further machines?”

“Then——”

“The only logical place is in Latham’s bank, whichever it is,” Ada insisted. “We can soon discover that by looking for his cheque book, or books, at his home. Then, we have explosives. What more do we want?”

Peter did not look convinced. He gave a shrug.

“Try it if you like,” he agreed. “Let’s be going.”

## CHAPTER FIVE

They reached Latham's home to find everything exactly as they had left it. It did not take long to find the cheque book—apparently he had only one account—since they remembered having seen it during their earlier search.

"Kembley's Bank, Central Branch," Peter said: "And just around the corner from here."

In a matter of minutes Kembley's Bank was reached. Five minutes after Peter and Ada had arrived a crashing explosion rolled heavily in the arrested air and the massive metal doors of the bank were blown clean off their hinges.

Peter pulled a small everlasting torch from his pocket and snapped it on. A watchman was frozen in the middle of his stride at the other side of the entrance hall. They descended into the vaults and then paused when they came to the enormous strong-room door with its complicated electrical lock.

"This is going to be tough," Peter commented. "We've four sticks of explosive left. It's certainly going to take three of them to make any impression on a door like this. Anyway, here goes."

He loaded three of the sticks into the lock-aperture, intertwined the fuses, and then lighted them. This done, he and Ada raced pell-mell back to the upper regions and out into the street. Here they waited tensely, their eyes fixed on the building.

There was a long pause in the eerie silence, then it came: a shattering concussion which made the ground vibrate and visibly rocked the bank building. Smoke belched out of its open front doorway.

"I hope," Ada said, as they began to move again, "that we don't set anything on fire! Or *can we?*"

"Don't see how we can in a Timeless state. Everything must be incapable of burning. It is only shattered by explosion because the explosion is created by material which belongs to Venusian time-ratio instead of our own."

Gaining the bank they made their way into the depths, then they looked at each other in delight. A hole six feet wide had been blasted through the forged steel.

"If things ever come back to normal we ought to have medals pinned on our chests for all this," Ada commented, scrambling through the aperture into the strong room.

Peter flashed the torch beam upon the four walls of the strong room. They were lined with little doors, each one fastened with a combination lock, but each door, fortunately, carried the name of the person concerned with it.

"I expect each person concerned has the combination of his own particular cubby hole," Peter commented, studying the names. "That's the usual system—and very helpful to us. Ah! Here we are! Adam Latham! So he *has* got something in safe custody. Let's hope it's the blueprint we want."

"Take care you don't destroy it with the explosion," Ada warned.

"Just what was worrying me. Best way is to blow up the cubby hole immediately above it, I think. And if it doesn't work we're sunk. This is the last of the explosive."

To find a convenient position for the explosive was not too easy. Finally Peter took the only course and secured the stick to the combination knob of the cubby-hole above Latham's. Then he lighted the fuse and he and Ada made a quick getaway through the hole in the strong-

room door. They crouched behind it until the explosion had blasted forth, then they hurried back through the dispersing fumes.

“It worked!” Peter exulted. “It’s smashed through the top of Latham’s cubby-hole. I can feel something rolled up—something crisp——”

He pulled vigorously and finally dragged into view a white roll with an elastic band about it. It was only the work of moments to spread the sheet flat on the floor, Ada directing the torch-beam downwards.

“It’s it!” she cried excitedly. “A complete diagram of the Brain’s circuit.”

“Yes—and what a circuit!” Peter gave a little whistle. “Gosh, Latham’s some engineer! I’ll never be able to figure this out if I live to be a hundred.”

“Seems to me you’ve got to—or *we*’ve got to,” Ada told him, her voice quieter. “Let’s take it back to the spaceship and study it properly in a decent light.”

They scrambled back through the wrecked door, returned up the stairs, and passed to the outside again. In thoughtful silence they retraced their way through the “frozen” streets.

“Another aspect comes into this,” Peter said. “Materials. Even if I can ever sort out the design I doubt if any material will work because of the Time-barrier. The Electronic Brain is *entirely* electrical—or was. How the devil do we get it to work in reverse if we can’t generate enough electrical energy to start it?”

Ada suddenly snapped her fingers. “I’ve got it! Use the energy of our space machine. It has an atomic power plant, and since it is made mainly of Venusian material it works perfectly. We know that from having flown about in this Timeless state.”

“Definitely you are extra bright,” Peter conceded, with a grin.

The thought of the brilliant scientist on Venus always ready to lend a helping hand, made him feel easier in his mind. Just the same he wanted, if possible, to solve the problem for himself since the matter was definitely one relating to Earth alone and normally outside the scope of an interplanetary neighbour.

Peter wasted no time in flattening the blueprint under the bright light when the space machine was reached. His brows were knitted and his eyes filled with a faraway look. Finally he made a comment.

“That confounded thing has three thousand nine hundred and twenty valves—of the A. L. and Z. class respectively—and two hundred transformers. Each of the transformers has a different wiring system. Do you begin to realise what that means?”

“Sounds like a lot of work,” Ada said.

“That’s just the point. Even if I can get every component—which is probably impossible—it will take me *years* to assemble everything.”

“Suppose it *does* take years. Does it matter?”

“But it’s—unthinkable!”

“Why is it? It doesn’t make any difference to the frozen people how many years pass.”

Peter gave a grave smile. “You’re certainly philosophic,” he said.

Immediately after a meal they both went to work to study the Brain’s circuit carefully. Its complication was so profound, however, they found that two hours of study at a sitting was quite enough if they were to continue to keep on thinking clearly.

“All work and no play makes Jill a dull girl,” Ada misquoted, stifling a yawn as she studied the stack of notes which had been made to date.

“We’ve progressed,” Peter said, thinking. “We know the outline of the circuit and the general principles involved. Lot to do yet, though—— Definitely Dr. Latham is—or was—a



genius. The pity was he over-reached himself.”

“You mean the machine did,” Ada corrected. “It was so good it caused all this upheaval.” She got stiffly to her feet. “We have to arrange our work from here on, Pete,” she decided. “Certain times for study, certain times for relaxation.”

“I agree—but how do we relax?”

“I was thinking of becoming a benefactor in my spare time. Remember, I mentioned it?”

“Oh, that . . . What happens if you get lost?”

“I’m grown up and I can find my way to Venus and back. Why should a motionless city bother me? Don’t worry. You won’t get rid of me that easily.”

Peter smiled and got to his feet. He put an arm about the girl’s shoulders.

“Great heavens, you didn’t think I meant it that way surely? What in the world would I do without you in a wilderness like this?”

“Same as I’d do without you—go stark, staring nuts! The fact that we’re both alive to talk to each other is the only thing that balances in this whole cockeyed situation.”

“I think,” Peter said, kissing the end of the girl’s nose, “that we should get a sleep and then ‘to-morrow’ we’ll work out a schedule of study and relaxation.”

“Done!”

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After awakening and having breakfast the schedule was worked out. Two hours study, two hours off, for twelve hours—the remaining twelve to be split up into four and eight.

The first spell of mental effort added further to the findings of the night before. Problems which had seemed obscure then now resolved themselves, by argument and computation, into logical channels. By very slow degrees it was seen how the whole web of the Brain’s intricate interior was absolutely interdependent, one thing upon another. In the main it seemed to operate through vibration, being mathematical, which in turn re-acted on a central unit which could only be called the real brain of the thing. In the sense that a human being reasons the machine did *not* reason. It produced certain postulations from known premises and extended them to their absolute limit of possibility. It was the problem, however, of understanding how all these postulations came about which had to be worked out—and therein there lay ahead many weeks, even months, of intensive study. Though experienced scientists, both Peter and Ada were having to start from scratch to understand the conceptions of a genius.

The first spell of study over Ada insisted on going for a walk, if only for the exercise. By agreement, all talk about the Brain was barred. Complete change of occupation was the only means of keeping the mind clear.

“There is much we can do to enliven our interest,” Ada pointed out, as they walked the petrified city. “We can, for instance, take a look at the last scene in a cinema before Time stopped. Or see the final tableau in a play. There’s something fascinating about studying a scene stopped dead when nobody expected it.”

Peter nodded, not very enthusiastically, so they made their first halt in an all-night cinema. It was packed to the doors with a motionless audience, the air heavy and warm. At the back of the stalls the trimly-clad usherettes were standing, caught in the midst of some girlish argument.

On the screen a “clinch” was in progress—a clinging one, which would, under present conditions, remain for ever.

“Let’s get out,” Ada murmured. “Nothing interesting here.”

She and Peter went through the lounge, passing the starch-fronted manager on the way. So to the outside again.

“How do you suppose animals have reacted?” Ada asked, looking across the street to *Marvel’s Mammoth Circus*, its gaudy facade plastered with posters showing men in leopard skins confronting snarling beasts.

“Same as we have,” Peter answered. “Does it signify?”

“Well, not really, but we haven’t seen an animal since we arrived in this timeless state. I’d rather like to—across the road. In fact, if I had my way I’d turn every one of the animals loose. I don’t approve of them being kept in captivity for a lot of mugs like you and me to stare at.”

“Now wait a minute!” Genuinely startled, Peter caught her arm. “Don’t start getting ideas like that! If you open the cages for wild beasts what is going to happen if time comes back to normal? There’ll be utter panic. Thousands of people may be killed or injured in stampedes.”

“I know,” Ada admitted, with a serious smile. “I’d *like* to turn the poor creatures loose, but I realise it’s impracticable. At least we can take a look at them. We’ve nothing else to do. Be a chance to put my arm in a lion’s mouth. I’ve often wondered what it must be like.”

Peter accompanied her across the street, not so much because he was interested but because there was nothing else to do at the moment. The circus was closed for the night but to enter it by a side window did not present any difficulty. After wandering through the darkened corridors, wondering in which direction lay the animals they wanted to survey, a distant glow of light caught their attention. They discovered it was coming from a partly opened side door.

Beyond it lay the brightly lit arena of the circus, a brilliant, sawdust-covered circle directly under a dozen flood-lights suspended in the lofty ceiling. Ada glanced over the empty rows of seats and then glanced upwards with a start of surprise.

“Look!” she exclaimed. “Did you ever see anything as queer as that?”

Peter did not say anything. The tableau was certainly remarkable. High up in the roof a girl was seated on a trapeze which had swung up to fifty degrees and there stopped in defiance of the law of gravity. Opposite her, a man gymnast was in mid-air, his body folded like a penknife as he half completed a somersault. Below him another man was a fraction from a lower trapeze which had swung diagonally into space.

“Nearly as weird as the bullet between the automatic and the girl in Soho,” Ada commented. “We——”

She paused, her eyes narrowed as she stared upwards.

“Do I need glasses or is one rope on that lower trapeze broken?” she asked. “Looks to be something like *smoke* coming from it . . .”

“Something queer,” Peter admitted. “Maybe we’d better take a closer look. We can climb up that ladder leading to the trapeze stand.”

They moved forward down one of the gangways, crossed to the centre of the arena, and gazed up at the acrobats overhead. There was no doubt about it now. One of the ropes on the lower trapeze *was* broken, but the division was so small it was hardly noticeable.

“Something queer here,” Ada said, and began to mount the trapeze ladder steadily. When she had reached the summit, Peter following behind her, the lower trapeze was on a level a few yards away. The drop to the ring below was considerable—a good two hundred feet.

“Notice those ropes?” Ada asked, as Peter crouched beside her on the small stand. “One of them has broken and is giving off a kind of wispy smoke. The other one is wet, gleaming, and also a bit smoky.”

“Acid!” Peter said abruptly. “That’s what it is.”

“But—but that man who had just touched the trapeze will crash when Time resumes. Just what is going on here, do you think?”

“I’ve no idea, but apparently something pretty sinister. This is obviously no ordinary circus act otherwise the place would be full of people and it wouldn’t be twenty to twelve at night. It’s an extra—a rehearsal or something. Maybe planned deliberately.”

Ada glanced about her, up to the girl seated on her trapeze and to her partner in mid-air.

“Everything seems to be all right between those two,” she said. “I mean their trapezes are okay. Up to us to give this fellow a chance to survive if things come back to normal . . . Do you suppose we can pull him down to the arena and make him safe?”

“Can’t think why not. There’ll be resistance, of course, but not too much. The difficulty will be to reach him, and neither of us is an acrobat.”

They solved the problem finally by using a long pole with a hook upon it. Latching the hook into the acrobat’s gilded belt they pulled downwards. It was like dragging a balloon through water, so immense was the resistance created by his rapid movement when he had been halted—but gradually he was lowered and finally he had been settled safely in the sawdust.

“Good enough,” Peter said, unhooking the pole. “What ever dirty work was going on has been nicely cleaned up. Come to think of it, this ‘good deed for the day’ notion of yours isn’t so bad at that. We might find something else— Enough clowning for one day—or night,” he amended, as he and Ada walked briskly through the street. “In fact, if years are going to elapse there’s no end to the things we might straighten out before we’re ready to put Time back on its natural course.”

Ada nodded, glad that at last she had swung Peter round to her way of thinking.

Arriving back at the space projectile they had a meal and then cleared the central table and began work once more on the blueprint, their stacks of notes beside them. Before long they were once again exchanging arguments and theories and, by this very method finding the right answer to several of the problems which confronted them . . . Nevertheless they had five such “sittings”, and several more days had gone by before they felt they had grasped the essentials of the apparatus.

“It seems to me,” Peter said, on the fifth occasion, “that theory is one thing and practice another, as far as this instrument is concerned, anyway. The only way to discover if it works is to build it—and that’s where we run smack into trouble.”

“Why?” Ada asked.

“Three thousand nine hundred and twenty A. L. and Z. valves,” Peter reminded her grimly. “And two hundred transformers, all with different windings. Where do we get the stuff?”

“From an electrical firm, obviously. The valves should not present much difficulty since they’re in common usage in radio and television sets. The transformers will be the difficulty. But since the blueprint gives the necessary windings I don’t see why we can’t do that ourselves. We must find two hundred transformer frames though!”

“Mmmm.” Peter pursed his lips and did not look too happy about the situation. “Best place to go for our materials is Marvern and Kennedy’s, the Birmingham electrical factors. They are about the biggest people in the country—or were.”

From decision to action was only a brief step and a few minutes later the space-flyer was in the air, skimming over the dark, petrified landscape in the direction of the Midlands. Peter brought the vessel down again at length at the Central Birmingham air-park, fully floodlit and

filled with motionless men and women who had been on the point of embarking on various 'planes when Time had stopped.

"Marvern's is only about a mile from here," Peter said, switching off the power plant. "I know Birmingham backwards from visits I've made myself. We'd better see what we can find."

"Everything in the world ours for the asking," Ada commented, as she followed him outside. "It's a pretty hefty thought."

"Ours where resistance doesn't prevent us getting hold of it," Peter reminded her.

Marvern and Kennedy's was closed for the night, but the windows were within easy access, so before long the two were wandering in the beam of a flashlight through the great engineering shops towards a sign which indicated—*Stores*. In this vast department, once they gained it, they found themselves surrounded by endless shelves of electrical necessities.

"Valves!" Peter exclaimed suddenly, nodding. "Here we are. Stacks of them. Must be ten thousand of them here of all grades. We've plenty of walking ahead of us back and forth to the ship with them. We want fifteen hundred 'A' valves, fifteen hundred 'L' and nine hundred and twenty 'Z'. Okay—hold out your arms."

"Why, when there's a trolley cradle over there?" Ada asked, and she moved across to it.

The trolley cradle was loaded to capacity with the precious valves and then pushed by Ada to the nearest external point of the building, the load being transferred by hand to the space machine. Then came the more difficult task of finding the transformer frames. They were hunted down finally in a separate department. Drums of wire were there too, bare and shining copper, stacked against the walls.

Two hundred medium sized frames, fitted with terminals but no "internals" as yet, were transferred to the space machine, together with several drums of wire . . . Nor was this the finish. Metal was needed for forming the actual framework of the Electronic Brain.

"To just happen on the right size of frame is too much to expect," Ada said, when an hour's search had brought no result except the finding of bars and sheets of spare metal. "I think we should make the framework ourselves in one of these furnaces and——"

"How? We can't use the power."

Ada sighed. "Confound it, I keep forgetting!"

"We shall have to abandon the idea of a framework altogether," Peter said, after pondering for a while. "We'll take some of this metal, which we can drill with the equipment we have aboard the ship, and use it as the base for the components. The switch panel, instead of being in front will be made up of dozens of separate switches without a panel at all. Crude, but as long as the circuit is there that's all that matters. Later we'll need vacuum tubes, magnets and sensitized magnetic metal for the brain-pan. In fact I think we've months of work ahead of us."

In this he had not exaggerated. He drove the machine back to the London air-park and from there on the real hard work began, chiefly in the wiring of the transformers. Then there were countless other details which needed back and forth trips to electrical suppliers. There were insulators wanted, switches, valve-holders, solder, insulating screens—the whole variety of components essential to a semi-radio equipment.

Complicated and slow though the work was the original formula of two hours on and two off was adhered to, and each time they went for a walk, always choosing a different direction, they seemed to come upon some luckless individual in the act of losing his or her life through sheer misfortune. At the end of a month they calculated they had saved nearly twenty lives—

then as the months dragged by they lost count entirely. They were both agreed that the queerest incident they had seen, apart from the acrobats in mid-air, had been that of a middle-aged, hatchet-faced lady in Maida Vale in the midst of a sneeze. Never before had they realised how queer a sneeze could look when almost at its peak. Not that there was anything they could do for the lady—except put a handkerchief in her motionless hand in readiness for the completion of the paroxysm.

## CHAPTER SIX

It was August, according to the calendar and chronometer, before the frame of the Electronic Brain No. 2 was complete—or at least before the base was made and all valve holders and connections were in the correct position—and it was in January of the following year before the two hundred transformers were all wired as directed.

Then followed another month of back-and-forth journeys to Birmingham to obtain tubes, magnets and other details essential to the Brain's make-up. So, at last, towards the end of February, the duplicate Brain—set up in the control room of the vessel in all its multi-wired nakedness—was finished according to specification.

“Who said it couldn't be done?” Ada asked proudly, surveying the equipment. “Maybe it *does* look like something devised by old-time Heath Robinson, but as long as it works, who cares?”

“There remains,” Peter said, “the problem of power. And in regard to that we face a pretty desperate choice.”

Ada glanced at him in surprise, and he went on to explain.

“The only way to get power, as you remarked at the commencement, is to use our own power plant in the ship here. To do that we shall have to completely convert the motor and destroy several parts of it to make way for new gadgets. In other words, we are going to kill the motive power of this ship for all time once the conversion is made—and we cannot get more fuel whilst everything is timeless. If the gamble comes off and the Brain works in consequence, bringing everything back to normal, all well and good—but if it does not we'll have burned our bridges behind us. We shall not be able to visit Venus and get help: we shan't even be able to get this bus of ours off the ground. It's a one-way ticket.”

“In other words, either this thing works, or we're stranded?”

“That's it.”

They both felt the solemnity of the moment as they looked at each other. Failure meant they would remain on this timeless world until they died. . . .

“We *mustn't* fail,” Ada said suddenly, her face determined. “Not after all we've gone through. How *can* we fail? We've done exactly as the blueprint says.”

“I know, but we've no guarantee but what Dr. Latham might not have added sundry gadgets of his own of which we know nothing. It's a terrible risk, Ada. Let's both be agreed that we take it.”

“I'm willing,” Ada decided at length, “but first I'd like to know what we are going to do to the machine. Do we try it out on simple things first until we're sure we've got the hang of it?”

“Most certainly.”

“Then what?”

“Then we ask it that famous question: What is Time? After that we watch what happens. When it reaches the same point as the other Brain did it ought to stop dead and——”

“Won't do,” Ada interrupted, shaking her head, and Peter looked surprised.

“Why won't it?”

“Because you'd simply race it to pieces. What's the use of asking it what Time is when there's no Time for it to work on? Now you are forgetting everything here is timeless, instead of me.”

Peter scowled in thought. “Mmmm—you’re right. To ask it what Time is might have unpredictable consequences . . . And yet,” he added, “I’m not so sure. Time *is* still advancing as far as we are concerned. Remember what the Venusian said: there is a trickle instead of a river. The Brain might be able to work on that.”

“Well, all right,” Ada agreed uneasily. “And what happens if *we* get involved in its computations? It would be the last straw if we got ourselves as transfixed as everybody else!”

“Most unlikely. Our synthetic bodies should prevent it.”

“But, Pete, if they *don’t*—?”

“One of the risks,” he said seriously. “We’ve got to take some terribly long chances if we’re ever to get things right again.”

Ada changed the subject after thinking for a moment or two. She looked at the mass of apparatus and then asked a question: “Do you think these valves will work, and the tubes and magnets and things, seeing that they belong in a timeless state?”

“I’d thought of that. I think they *will* because the energy powering them will be normal—from our own plant. We’ll find out quickly enough when we’ve dismantled and converted this atomic-energy motor of ours. And that’s the next job on hand.”

So they began work on it and commenced for themselves several more weeks of labour. To make all the necessary changes was difficult and complicated since they had to be sure no excess of current went into the Brain. If there was too little they could easily build it up—but too much would definitely burn it out and ruin nearly a year of intensive assembly.

By mid-March the job was finished, and they had arrived at the grim hour when the first test could be made. Both of them were looking uneasy as they finished checking everything over for the last time. Nothing had been overlooked—every connection, terminal, and valve was in its place. The only unknown factor was whether Latham had added something after making his blueprint. If so—

“Well,” Peter said, his hand on the main switch, “this is it. If it lights up and works we have a reasonable chance of straightening things out. If it doesn’t we’re finished. Are you ready?”

“Go ahead,” Ada said quietly, her lips taut.

Peter closed the switch and then stood watching the Brain intently. He felt he wanted to dance, or sing, or do something entirely crazy when he saw the pilot-lamps light up brightly, showing that power was surging normally through the instrument.

“It works!” he whispered, his eyes bright. “Unbelievable though it is, it works! The thing now is to close the receptor-switch, which should make it capable of receiving questions and answering them.”

“Carry on,” Ada invited. “We’re not turning back now.”

Peter pressed the receptor-switch down. There was a click from within the wilderness of complication and a couple of tubes glowed.

“My guess was right,” he said. “Since we are using an energy which is not bound by the Time-factor it is actuating the valves, wires, and components normally enough. What is the multiple of eight eights?” he asked.

“Sixty-four,” boomed the machine, its selector-soundtrack operating perfectly.

“Are time and space inter-related?” asked Ada.

The slender bars moved up and down and the valves winked with internal efforts.

“Inextricably,” the machine answered.

Peter switched off, too excited to dare risking any further questions at the moment in case he happened to pose one which would set the machine off on a rampage.

“We’ve done it!” Ada cried, hugging him.

“Definitely! And now we come to the hard part—asking the same question as that U.S. representative and then watching what happens.”

“Better do it now, Pete, before we lose our nerve.”

Peter nodded, snapped on the receptor-switch again and then asked deliberately: “What is Time?”

Immediately the valves began to glow brightly; the tubes suffused with brilliant flame colours, the queer connecting rods glided up and down. The machine’s wrestling match with itself was on.

“This is going to take a long while, I expect,” Peter said, standing back. “We must keep our eyes on it just the same so we can be ready the moment it reaches that barrier line.”

Ada nodded, pulled up a chair, and settled on it. Peter remained standing, his eyes on the quivering needles of the indicators. He knew the lay-out so completely they made sense to him, registering the build-up of postulations, the power the machine was consuming, and so forth. And so the clicking continued with a relentless deliberation.

An hour passed and no result was forthcoming though the Brain was working furiously. Two hours. Then suddenly, when nearly three hours were up there was a sudden click from the mechanisms, and the apparatus stopped dead. It began to glow with an eerie brilliance, and into the minds of both Peter and Ada there poured a sudden flood of mathematical conceptions. They could feel trigonometrical formulae and algebra roots swimming through their brains. Peter, never quite realising why, closed the power switch. Instantly the machine became dead, and the mathematical mist evaporated.

“Now I get it!” he exclaimed, looking at Ada. “That other machine would never have caused the havoc it did, had it been switched off at this point in its calculations. Instead of being stopped, it kept on going. Because of that it went on postulating a mathematical theory about Time and reacted on Time in its efforts to prove its own figures. When it got to the problem of non-Time split seconds it created a barrier in Time, and everything came to a halt. *Then*, because the machine did not continue going, or was not put into reverse, the state it had created remained unaltered.”

“Sounds possible,” Ada agreed. “This one has almost got to the same point, and I’m wondering how it will react on a state which is almost non-Time already. I don’t think it will work. We’ll not change anything.”

“That,” Peter agreed, musing, “is the point. We’ve reached the most critical stage, and one wrong move may smash everything to bits.”

Ada pondered also for a moment or two, then she said: “By this universal switch we can undo everything it has postulated and re-set it on zero—just the same as you can turn back the units on a trip milometer. Suppose we do that and devise a totally different question, one aimed specially at unlocking the paralysis which has been created?”

“Good idea,” Peter agreed, and turned the control knob which put all the postulator-mechanisms out of contact. Automatically the machine was back on zero.

“What *sort* of a question?” Ada asked. “That is the problem.”

“I wonder if it *is* such a problem?” Peter was looking at the machine thoughtfully. “Automatically, this machine has the power to reason. In Latham’s own words it can solve any problem posed for it. Well, then, surely that is the answer? We ask it how to undo frozen



Time? If it is all it's supposed to be it will explain how. Think of the trouble that would save us!"

"That is, if it can do it."

"No harm in trying."

Peter switched on the receptor control once more and came straight to the point with his question.

"If the action of the Time dimension be halted by the postulations of a mathematical machine, how can the position be rectified?"

There followed the customary internal struggle of winking valves and sliding gears, mechanism working against mechanism and queer, inexplicable variants drifting throughout the whole scientific maze. It was twenty minutes later before the Brain answered.

"The action of the Time dimension can only be halted by a certain number of variants which, crosswise to the dimension, act as a neutraliser. The removal of these variants and resumption of Time can only be achieved by cancelling factors."

Peter looked blank. "What are cancelling factors?" he questioned.

"The mathematical formulae necessary to render certain other mathematical formulae void."

Peter switched off and scratched his head. "Easy as that," he said helplessly. "I've not the remotest idea what the darned thing is talking about."

"I have," Ada said thoughtfully. "What it means is, a certain mathematical formula was set up which arrested Time. If we can find out what that formula was, this monster will automatically find the opposite formula which will cancel out the original. After all, cancellation is a normal offshoot of everyday mathematics."

"And how do we find the formula which started the paralysis?"

"Simply ask this thing once again what Time is and then let it go forward to the point it did before, when you switched off. From the dial readings we'll know just what formula it has arrived at."

"Sounds damned complicated, but I'll try anything once because I've no choice."

Again Peter switched on, and again he asked the question: "What is Time?" Once more the machine went into its internal battle, and, as before, nearly three hours passed before there came the click and then the sensation of stress and strain. Immediately Peter switched off and stood studying the dials.

"These make sense to you?" he asked.

Ada examined them and then shook her head. "Afraid not—but then, they are not likely to. They represent mathematical variations and have nothing to do with ordinary figuring as we understand it. This monster works from the point where the human brain leaves off from sheer lack of concentration. All that we can do is make a note of these variants and then give them to this machine after we've switched it back to zero. We can ask it to find the cancelling factors for these variants and that—perhaps—will do the trick."

So, from each dial, the exact reading was copied down—and there being twenty dials it took an hour, with careful checking to be sure no wrong figuring had crept in. The finished formula looked like something conceived by a mad mathematical genius.

"Just what makes you think the cancellation of this formula will work?" Peter asked, frowning.

"Why not? At the moment that formula is in being. It exists as an invisible barrier of computations and is preventing any movement of normal time. If it is cancelled out, it ceases

to be, and everything will be back where it was when the formula first came into being. You see, Peter,” Ada continued, “we are not dealing with a material thing but an abstract one, which is what makes it so hard to understand. If we want to remove an object from an otherwise clear landscape we blow it out of the way by explosive and the landscape is as it was before the object arrived. In this case we do the same thing, only we are working with forces, variants, and the energy of built-up mathematics and equational strains. Try the thing out, anyway, and let’s see what happens.”

Peter switched the machine back to zero and then, with the receptor in action, read out the formula, finishing with a question:

“Can you find the cancelling factors necessary to make that formula of no consequence? Can you blot out all traces of it by a—er—counter force of mathematics?”

“I can blot out the formula, yes, by cancelling factors, but I cannot build up a counter force in regard to Time.”

“We don’t need one!” Ada exclaimed, as Peter thought this one out. “When the barrier is cancelled we don’t need anything else to take its place. All we want is normality.”

“Of course,” Peter agreed surprised; then to the machine he added: “Very well, work out the cancelling factors.”

The machine started up deliberately and then stopped again as Ada suddenly switched it off. Peter looked at her in amazement.

“Now what? We’re just on the verge of putting everything straight—we hope!—and you go and——”

“I’ve a reason,” Ada interrupted. “See the date?”

“Uh-huh. Fifteenth March. What of it?”

“And the time?”

“Half-past ten in the morning.”

“Very well then. If everything reverts to its normal place when Time restarts it also means that the sun and moon will, in a sudden rush, catch up on the time they have lost. The time lost amounts to nearly a year. When the ‘slack’ has been taken up it will be full daylight on the morning of March fifteenth, nineteen seventy one. But the *people* won’t shoot through a year’s progress because they have not *done* anything in that year. It’s different with celestial bodies which have their ordered paths to follow. What I am getting at,” Ada finished, as Peter looked at her in bewilderment, “is that everybody will resume from the instant they left off—and they will find themselves in broad daylight with the clocks at twenty to twelve. They may think the clocks mean twenty to twelve *a.m.*, but they will only remember it being night. Everywhere lights will be on with the sun shining and——”

Ada stopped, then asked helplessly: “Oh, don’t you see?”

Peter looked vaguely amused. “Yes, sure I do. You mean it would create a terrible lot of confusion throughout the world to find the sun and moon at variance with the time, to say nothing of the confusion in people’s minds knowing it was night one moment and full day the next.”

“Yes, that *is* what I mean. So I suggest we wait four days until the nineteenth. When that occurs a year will have gone by since the thing happened. Set the Brain to work so that, as near as we can judge, it cancels out the existing formula at eleven-forty at night. We might just manage to start things going again at that time—a year later. That way nobody will know the difference. It will be normal night, apparently normal Time, and the only thing missing will be one day—one to-morrow—because of course the year will have advanced every day by one.

So calendars which read Tuesday are a day late and should be Wednesday. Not that anybody will ever know.”

“They will somehow,” Peter mused. “There will descend a complete mystery on the minds of every living soul as unexpected things presented themselves. For everybody there will be a lost to-morrow. . . . However,” he continued, arousing himself from speculation, “that doesn’t signify so much. It is getting things back which counts. All right then, we’ll wait until eleven o’clock on the nineteenth, then we’ll start the machine up. That should give it forty minutes to work things out.”

And from then on the time had never seemed to drag more. There was just nothing to do but eat, sleep, walk about outside, and wait—but gradually the chronometer reached the appointed hour on the nineteenth, and on the stroke of eleven Peter closed the switch. Immediately the Brain continued with its computations from the point where Ada had switched it off.

Motionless, she and Peter stood watching and waiting, glancing at the clock at intervals. 11-15—11-30, and the Brain was still unravelling the mathematical knots its predecessor had created in the abstract dimension of Time.

Then, within a few minutes of 11-40 there came a familiar clicking—and something happened. It was so awe-inspiring it left Ada and Peter gaping in amazement. From the Brain there radiated a peculiar wave. It was visible, and yet it was not, a rippling distortion in the ether in which Peter and Ada were both caught. They could feel it tugging at their nerves and blurring their minds; then it passed on. Had they but known it, it was the reverse action of the original wave the first Brain had created—a tremendous cancelling stress wiping out the static Time condition which had been brought about.

In that instant incredible things happened. Time, undammed, reverted to its normal position. Outside the ship it suddenly became daylight, then night. Day—night—day—so fast it was a mere twinkling and an intolerable strain to the eye. The moon, sweeping through its phases, reeled across the sky in the dark intervals, until at last the three hundred and sixty five nights and days which had gone had been caught up and the exact normal instant was back in place.

In these same seconds of chaos, during which Earth reeled and swung back to its natural revolution other things happened too—things immediate to Peter and Ada, awed by the incredible untying of the Time-knot.

Upon their ears, through the open airlock of the spaceship, there suddenly blasted an appalling roar—or at least it seemed that way at first, then they realised that after a year in a silent world the din of the everyday seemed overpowering. A nearby plane which had stood petrified for twelve months with a mechanic beside it started up its engine. The flag over the Executive Building fluttered in the breeze. There was a tremendous tumult from people entering and leaving the air-park—a greater throbbing roar from the city itself.

“It worked,” was all Ada could say, breathless. “Pete, it *worked!*”

“Right,” he assented. “And it’s normal night, now the sun has finished careering round the sky. And look, the clock on the Executive Building is moving on. It’s nearly quarter to eleven! I—I feel sort of shaky somehow. Scared!”

He glanced towards the Brain. Its formula worked out it stood silent, the metals at zero now this particular problem had been dealt with.

In other directions as Time resumed surprising things happened. In a top room in Soho a bullet slammed into the wall, and Minnie Carstairs found herself looking at the ceiling. She

just could not understand it. She *knew* she had been standing by the wall, looking straight into the flaming muzzle of Nick Charters' automatic. There had been no time-gap for her. One moment she had been looking at the gun; now she was flat on her back on the bed with the ceiling above. And something close to her hand—the brush tray! She sat up and stared at it.

Nick Charters himself cuffed up his hat and wiped his moist forehead, convinced he was going nuts. His gun had just exploded in his hand, only instead of facing Minnie he was in a corridor somewhere and——

“Hey you!” bawled the voice of the proprietress from the foot of the stairs. “Get off my property before I call the police!”

“All right, all right,” Nick growled, stupefied. “What in blue hell’s the matter with me?”

He looked up as the figure of Minnie appeared in the doorway of the room. She was looking as bewildered as he felt. They looked at each other for a fixed moment, she holding the brush tray in readiness to hurl at him, he with his gun. Then, with a hesitant movement he put the gun back in his pocket.

“What happened?” he asked deliberately, moving forward. “So help me, Minnie, what happened? Am I crazy, are you, or what?”

“Get out!” Minnie breathed, her lovely face venomous. “Go on, get out!”

“But what happened?” Nick insisted. “You and me, I mean. I’ll swear I shot at you, and then, suddenly—I don’t begin to understand it!”

Neither did Minnie, but she would not admit it. She knew she ought to be dead with a bullet in her heart, not standing here talking. Or perhaps she *was* dead and this was some crazy dream.

“I said—get out,” she repeated.

Normally Nick would never have obeyed her, but just at this moment he was too utterly baffled to argue. He turned, frowning hard, then hesitated at the sound of voices at the foot of the stairs—deep voices, full of officialdom.

“Police!” Nick gave a start and turned. “Minnie, you’ve got to hide me. You’ve——”

“Not me,” Minnie said flatly and held the brush tray edgewise to deliver a smashing blow if need be.

No such need arose. In a matter of moments a constable had come up the stairs, leaving another in the hall. He looked at Nick and then gave a grim smile.

“You eh?” he asked. “Very nice. We’ve been looking for you for quite some time.”

Nick didn’t answer. Minnie turned to the constable.

“I’m charging this man with attempted murder,” she said. “You’ll find the evidence in the wall of my room. It will check with the automatic he has in his pocket.”

Nick did not speak, but he went into the girl’s room in front of the constable and stood looking in wonder as a bullet was dug out of the plaster.

“How in the name of the devil did that get there?” Nick asked at last, blankly. “I was in the *corridor!*”

“There’s not only this charge, Nick, but several others,” the constable told him grimly. “You’d better come along. You all right, miss?”

Minnie nodded vaguely. “Er—yes, I’m all right.”

She knew she was not speaking the truth. She had never felt less “all right” in her life. She felt shrouded in some kind of enigma, a clouding of the mind. Just as though a slice had dropped out of her life somewhere. . . .

She was not alone in this sensation. For everyone, as Time jumped a twelve-month gap and then caught up, there was that odd feeling of something *missing*, like trying to remember an act which should have been performed and had not.

An act in the literal sense which was causing considerable confusion was in the case of the Three Flying Daredevils who had been doing their rehearsal. The second partner got up slowly from the sawdust and scratched his head, staring up at a trapeze which had given way down one rope and was corroding and smoking on the other. He was completely unhurt. He grasped all this in a matter of seconds, then he watched as the third man partner completed his somersault and caught hold of his trapeze. No man could have looked more astounded than the third partner at that moment. In fixed astonishment he looked at the small figure of the man in the arena below, unhurt, gazing upwards. In the near foreground hung the shattered trapeze.

“How—how did you get *there*?” demanded the girl, in something approaching a shriek.

“I dunno—call it a miracle.” The second partner’s grim voice came floating up. “That trapeze I should have caught has been tampered with, and by rights I ought to be smeared in the sawdust here. . . . Maybe *you* can explain it, Carlotti?”

The third partner looked sourly below.

“Why the hell should *I* be able to explain it?”

“Because you’ve been trying to finish me several times recently and this looks like your handiwork. Come down here and let’s get the issue settled.”

But Carlotti did not come down. He remained trying to think what had gone wrong. The girl, too, was frowning hard and looking about her in bewilderment. That sense of something missing was upon her every bit as much as it had been—and still was—on Minnie Carstairs. . . .

And the night watchman at the Scientific Institute looked at his watch again and scratched his head. It was 11-43. He glanced behind him and then started. He had had a few shocks in his life but none so violent as this. Apparently without a sound the door of the nearest basement had been smashed to pieces. The doorway was gaping wide. Immediately the watchman hurried forward and then stood gazing in stunned awe at the ruins of the Electronic Brain, glass carpeting the floor.

“It couldn’t *be*,” he whispered. “It just couldn’t *be*— Smashed to pieces! My God, what’s the Doctor going to say about this?”

Just how everything had happened in total silence was quite beyond the watchman. He fled along the corridors, made an unintelligible remark to his fellow-watchman, and then raced up the stairs. Finally he gained the telephone and yanked it from its rest.

At which moment Henry J. Johnson finished his wink and the girl third from the end of the row of chorines winked back. The can-can continued, the orchestra working up to its final frenzy. Everybody resumed conversation and everything was as it had been. The clock moved on—and in Maida Vale Miss Honoria Simpkins completed her mighty sneeze and looked dazedly at her handkerchief.

To these various people there was only a vague awareness of something peculiar, of something not quite right—but to other people there were glaring evidences of something very much wrong. Those who found themselves escaping death in the midst of the traffic, for instance. They knew they had stepped into the track of oncoming destruction, and yet now — Now there was safety, and the attendant riddle of how it had come about.

In the hallway of Kembley's Bank the watchman gazed in utter amazement at the blown-off doors of the building, then he swung round and began a routine search. It wasn't long before he found the blasted strong-room door and the hole in the safe-custody recess rented by Adam Latham. He too made for the nearest telephone and jangled it urgently.

In Birmingham, as yet, the depletion of stores from Marvern and Kennedy's had not been discovered. Those in charge were due for a big surprise in the morning.

As for Adam Latham he sat at his desk and fingered his forehead, trying to remember what he had intended to write on the sheet before him. He was convinced there was something wrong somewhere: his thought processes had been disturbed. Then the telephone rang, and he was disturbed still further.

"Adam Latham speaking," he said.

"Night watchman 'ere, sir—Scientific Institoot. Somethin' queer's bin 'appening. Your machine's busted an'——"

"What!" Latham interrupted hoarsely. "*What* did you say?"

"Machine sir— That thing y'stuck in the cellar. It's blown up or somethin'. You'd better come."

"I certainly had!" Latham slammed down the telephone, half got up, then reflected. Picking the phone up again he advised the President and Secretary of the Institute to join him there, then he began moving. In the process of doing so he paused, frowning. There was something queer about the desk drawers. Some were pushed in completely, others were slightly open. Which was something Latham could not understand. If there was one thing which infuriated him it was a partly closed drawer.

"I must be getting careless," he reproved himself, and then he hurried out for his hat and coat. In a matter of fifteen minutes he had reached the Institute and found the President and Secretary already there, surveying—with a couple of constables—the broken window near the main doorway.

"What's the matter?" Latham demanded irritably. "What's going on?"

The President turned with a greeting and then added: "Looks as though the night watchman has been asleep on the job, Doctor. Somebody's broken in, blown up the basement containing your Electronic Brain and smashed your equipment to atoms."

"They did, eh?" Latham scowled in mystification. "Can't think why anybody should want to do that, unless it's sheer jealousy of my scientific ability. Let's have a look at it."

He led the way into the now fully lighted building, where a nervous night watchman was hovering around uncomfortably with his equally sheepish colleague. Latham ignored him and continued on his way to the basements, the President, Secretary, and two constables at his heels. Once he saw the damage to his equipment Latham stood staring at it in utter wonder.

"Thorough, whoever they were," he said, and the President looked at him in surprise.

"You don't sound particularly worried, Doctor, *I* should be, if this invention belonged to me."

Latham did not reply for a moment. He studied the door which had been blown from its moorings and then the dials and wires scattered in all directions. Finally he turned to the troubled night-watchman who had followed the party below.

"You mean to tell me somebody could create this havoc, create an explosion of shattering violence, and you never *heard* it?" Latham demanded.

"That's right, Dr. Latham. Neither me nor my mate heard anything an' we was both down here. I just don't understand it!"

“Sleeping on the job,” declared the President pompously. “There’s going to be trouble over this, Leach—you’ll see!”

“I’d better take particulars, sir, and get busy,” commented one of the policemen, his notebook ready.

“Get them from the President,” Latham instructed, with a wave of his hand. “I’ve no time for such trifles. I’ve some hard thinking to do.”

Hands plunged deep in his overcoat pockets he wandered away, oblivious, brooding as he went. He found he had come to the outdoors again without realizing it—then as he raised his eyes and contemplated the Victoria Embankment it occurred to him that there was a surprising drift of people and traffic to the south, far in excess of normal. Finally he walked down the big driveway of the Institute and stopped a hurrying passer-by.

“What’s the rush for everybody?” he asked. “A fire or something?”

“No—a spaceship!” The man was looking excited. “Remember Peter Carton and his wife who set off for Venus not so long ago? They’re back. They’re at the air-park— Funny thing,” the man finished. “Nobody saw them arrive. They just sort of got here!”

Latham’s look of wonderment deepened, then making up his mind he joined the general flow of people and finished up at the air-park ten minutes later, to find himself in the midst of dense throngs surging in the glare of the flood-lamps. Visible over the heads of the pressing men and women were television cranes and cameras and news-reel men perched on the top of cars. Also visible was the shining grey of the space machine’s summit.

Within the vessel, Peter and Ada were absolutely hemmed in, and since the reporters who were questioning them did not know what a half-erected Electronic Brain looked like they assumed the multitude of wires and valves in the control room belonged to the spaceship itself. For nearly half an hour now, ever since their machine had first been spotted, Ada and Peter had been under fire. By mutual consent they kept quiet about the Time lapse. To start talking about that, without anything to prove it, might not sound so well for their mentalities.

“How did you manage to get back here without betraying the fact?” asked the *Daily* man.

“Was it invisibility?” questioned the man from the *Weekly*.

“Yes, yes, that was it—invisibility,” Peter agreed wearily, seizing on the excuse. “It’s a—er—Venusian secret. I can’t pass it on because I don’t know it.”

“When did you get back?” asked a woman from *Feminine Freedom*, looking straight at Ada.

“Back? Oh—er—quite recently.” Ada was instantly on the defensive. “This—this evening, in fact.”

“Which means you’ve been away about a month?”

Peter did not answer—not because he was trying to evade the issue but because his attention had been distracted by a smallish, untidy man pushing his way into the control room. It was Dr. Adam Latham. He stood looking about him, then his sharp eyes met Peter’s directly.

“You know what I’m thinking?” Latham asked curtly.

“I—I think so,” Peter admitted.

“Very well then, what’s the explanation? All this equipment in here is an exact duplicate of my Electronic Brain, which has been smashed to pieces in the Scientific Institute.”

The reporters pricked up their ears. Peter noticed it and gave the scientist a harrassed look.

“Can I speak to you privately about this, Dr. Latham?”

“Why should you? I should imagine the wrecking of my equipment and its illegal duplication in this space machine of yours is something *everybody* ought to know about. What’s the meaning of it?”

Peter was forced into a corner. He gave Ada a helpless glance then turned back to Latham, and the pressmen and women crowding into the control room and airlock.

“The truth is,” Peter said, hesitating, “you, Doctor, and everybody else on Earth—and the Earth itself—have been locked in suspended animation for exactly twelve months. For that period Time stopped dead.”

Nobody said anything. The reporters in particular, used to hearing startling news, were really astounded this time.

“You mean to tell me,” Latham asked deliberately, “that everything has been motionless, in non-Time, for twelve months?”

“That’s right. To-day’s date is not March 19th, 1970, but March 19th, 1971.”

“And how does that tie up with your stealing my equipment?” Latham demanded. “And don’t tell me you didn’t. This is my apparatus, crudely assembled.”

“I freely admit it,” Peter replied. “We used it to put Time straight again. Your original Electronic Brain locked everything up . . . That’s *true*, I tell you. How else do you suppose we could arrive here in a space machine and never be noticed? We arrived when everybody was paralysed. And we risked using our power plant—and making this ship immobile—to bring Time back to normal. We succeeded. But we waited until exactly a year had gone by, waited until the exact time in fact—eleven-forty—before putting matters straight. . . .”

That did it. In a sudden flood the reporters vomited out of the space machine into the airpark. Such news had never hit the world in all its varied history.



## CHAPTER SEVEN

For a moment or two Latham stood thinking as the control-room emptied. Then he raised his eyes to Peter again.

"I'm the only living man who really understands the Electronic Brain," he said, "and for that reason I realise it is dimly possible that perhaps the instrument *did* do something to Time. After all, it was asked a question of profound significance: What is Time? I was uneasy when I considered the number of postulations the machine might have to make to answer the question. . . . There are other issues too. I am suffering from a queer obfuscation of the mind. I find it hard to remember what I did earlier this evening. A time-lag of twelve months in the consciousness might account for it. But tell me more, Mr. Carton. You're an acknowledged scientist, so I'm prepared to listen——"

Peter began to explain, but he had hardly got beyond the first few words before there came an interruption in the shape of a police sergeant, and a couple of constables behind him.

"Oh, here you are, Dr. Latham!" The Sergeant looked apologetic. "I called at your home and couldn't get any answer, so I tried the Science Institute. They told me there you'd last been seen going in the direction of the air-park here. I confirmed from some of the people outside that you'd been seen entering this machine and——"

"Oh come to the point!" Latham interrupted impatiently. "What do you want with me?"

"I was called to investigate a robbery at the Kembley Bank Central Branch. The only thing missing appears to be something out of your safe-deposit box. Nothing else has gone. So I tried to contact you immediately. Incidentally, sir, are you aware that your front room window has been smashed?"

"No," Latham answered vaguely. "My safe-deposit box?" he repeated.

"It had a plan of the Brain in it," Peter said. "There's no mystery about the thing. I took it, so I could design this equipment you see here. I could never have done it otherwise."

"Do you realise what you are saying, sir?" the sergeant asked grimly, his eyes switching to Peter.

"It's all right, sergeant, I'm not bringing any charge against Mr. Carton," Latham said. "Thanks for handing on the information."

"I'm afraid the case is out of your hands, sir. The Bank is making the charge—unlawful entry, to say nothing of the damage caused to the strong-room door by high explosive. I'll have to ask you to come along, sir," he added, as Peter waited.

"Then I'm coming too," Ada declared. "I had as much to do with it as he did."

Peter glanced at her. "Remember what I told you? I *thought* we'd get something like this for breaking into the bank."

"I don't see you could expect much else," the sergeant growled. "Outside, please."

Peter paused in the airlock. "Sorry, Doctor," he apologised. "I've no chance now to tell you everything—unless you're allowed to come and see me in jail."

"Oh, this is ridiculous!" Latham protested. "I'll come along with you and bail you out. At the moment, young man—and you, too, Mrs. Carton—you are both about the most important people in the community. Absurd! Absurd! I'll soon straighten matters out."

But it did not prove as easy as that. For all his eminence as a scientist, to say nothing of the money he offered, Adam Latham got no result. Bail was not allowed. Breaking into the

Kembley Bank by a mysterious process which had failed to disturb the watchman was considered no mean crime and nothing else but a trial could settle it. Added to that was the charge of unlawful entry brought by the Scientific Institute. In this case the ancient law of vandalism was invoked.

So towards one in the morning Peter and Ada found themselves in separate cells in a central London Police Station waiting to be brought before the magistrates and there formally charged. Latham, for his part, went to the air-park police and asked them to keep a special guard over the space machine, then he returned home and rang up his lawyer friend, Grant Pascal.

Pascal was in bed, but the fact brought forth a snort of annoyance from Latham.

"Then get *out* of bed and come to my place immediately," he ordered. "Something outlandish has happened, and I need all your legal knowledge. Hurry it up!"

"Now?" Pascal wailed.

"Now!"

So in twenty minutes Pascal's car arrived outside the front gate. Latham opened the door and then conducted the lean-faced, middle-aged lawyer into the study.

"What is it, murder?" Pascal asked wearily, accepting the cigarette offered him.

"Worse! I have a young man and a woman who have saved the world and its peoples from a paralysis, in the grip of a paralysis of a different colour—the dead hand of the law."

"In a while, with luck, I shall know what you are talking about," Pascal said.

"Are you aware," Latham asked deliberately, "that for the past twelve months this Earth has not been revolving, nobody has been moving, and everything has been arrested in the middle of its tracks? Of course you're not aware—but these two young folks I'm talking about *are*! They get things put right by a supremely skilful effort, and what happens? Jail! For breaking into a bank and taking only one thing—*my* formula, or rather blueprint. I'm not pressing charges but the Bank is. *Can* they? That is what I want to know."

"Breaking into a bank is an offence, naturally. Surely you know that?"

"But when breaking into the bank is to benefit the world at large, what then? Dammit, nothing valuable was taken except my blueprint, and *I'm* making no complaint about that."

"Law's law," Pascal said, waking up slowly, "but what's all this business about everything stopping for twelve months?"

"No doubt of it. My Electronic Brain did it. The blasted thing must have been too efficient in trying to find out the nature of Time. But for Peter Carton and his wife being away in space at the time and returning to find everything immovable we'd still be paralysed. I haven't got all the details from him yet, but I shall. What I want is his release."

"Isn't bail allowed?"

"No. I tried that."

"And does Carton admit that he broke into the bank?"

"He does. So does his wife."

"In what circumstances was the bank broken into?" he asked at length. "Which bank is it? Kembley's, I suppose, since your stuff was taken?"

"Kembley's yes. The whole thing was done when the watchman—and everybody in the city for that matter—was paralysed, so it looks like a neat criminal trick to those who don't know the facts."

Pascal shrugged and said: "I'd better see Carton myself and talk to him. I want all the facts of this business before I can assess his chances."

“Whatever his chances you’ve got to defend him, and his wife, I insist on that. I’ll pay for everything—but I expect a result.”

Pascal got to his feet. “I’ll see Carton first thing in the morning,” he promised. “And, come to think of it, you could just as well have told me all this over the phone. Good-night.”

“Night,” Latham growled and sat thinking at his desk long after the lawyer had gone. And the more he thought the more troubled Latham became.

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By morning a further charge had been added to the list against Peter, particularly as he freely confessed to the “crime.” In a word, the removal of valuable materials and huge stocks of valves from Marvern and Kennedy had been discovered, and the police had not been slow to lay the matter at Peter’s door.

“There’s no sense in denying it,” he told Latham, and lawyer Pascal when they were permitted to see him. “There was no other way to get materials.”

“Tell us exactly what happened from start to finish,” Pascal instructed.

Peter did so, and it took him half an hour. When it was finished the lawyer was looking dazed.

“Good Lord,” he said, shaking his head. “Good Lord!”

“That the best you can say?” Latham asked bluntly. “How does Carton here get free? Wife included, of course.”

“Far from getting free I just dare not press the defence on these grounds,” Pascal insisted. “Surely you can see the situation? The defence is that everything happened whilst Time stood still! Well, I ask you! Who’s going to believe that? Who is even going to start to *understand* it, let alone believe it? And if I insist on it the next thing we know Mr. Carton and his wife will be shut up in an asylum for the rest of their lives.”

“Huh?” Peter gasped, startled.

“Rubbish,” Latham declared.

But Pascal shook his head. “It isn’t rubbish, Adam. This matter is more serious than you realise. Carton here would do better to do a prison sentence for unlawful entry and let it go at that. Plug the Time angle and it’s the finish. I just won’t touch it if that’s the only defence.”

“I’ve thought of a possible angle, though I’m not lawyer enough to know if it’s workable,” Peter said. “But technically, Ada and I are not Earth people at all. We’ve got bodies made from *Venusian* materials. Now, can one arrest somebody who is not of Earth stock?”

Pascal’s hatchet-face lightened for a moment, then it clouded again.

“Can you prove it?” he muttered.

“That’s the drawback, I can’t. I can’t even go to Venus because the space machine won’t—Yes it will!” Peter broke off. “I keep thinking that Time is still frozen. I can get fuel and fly to Venus. I can have the furry one prove everything.”

“If you can get out of here,” Pascal reminded him, and that brought silence again.

“Oh, this is monstrous!” Latham declared. “This furry one can prove everything, you say? All right, I’ll fly to Venus myself and try and get him to come back here and help us.”

“I don’t think you will,” Pascal said gloomily. “That space machine is being held by the authorities because it contains the duplicate of your Electronic Brain, which is all part of the case against Mr. Carton here. They won’t let you use it. And you won’t build another one until long after the trial is over, I’m afraid.”

“We could try a radio message to Venus,” Latham said, musing.

“Yes, that’s an idea,” Peter agreed, his eyes brightening. “I know it will be received.”

"I'll see the authorities about it immediately," Latham promised. "I was also trying to think of some way in which the Electronic Brain might help, but I don't think there is one. It deals only with exact problems. It cannot, for instance, declare what you did during the non-Time which engulfed everybody else."

"In court I shall state simply just what happened," Peter said, shrugging. "Nothing else I can do. And Ada will do likewise. Do I take it you're not going to defend me, Mr. Pascal?"

The lawyer eyed him worriedly. "I'll defend you, of course, but on what grounds I don't know. I'm terribly handicapped because the story sounds so preposterous. The pity is we can't get the various people whom you helped—like the girl in Soho, or that man on the trapeze—to speak for you because they won't be aware what happened. Still, they *might* help. I'll get in touch with them anyway. The whole issue is, it is next to impossible to prove to anybody that a certain period of time has elapsed without their being aware of it. There is nothing—relative."

"There must be," Latham said. "I'll think of something. Dammit, I'm not a scientist for nothing."

So the interview ended—Pascal departing to gather what facts he could to help the defence, and Latham to the authorities to ask for permission to radio Venus. To his surprise the request was flatly refused.

"What the devil do you mean by that?" he demanded of the President of the British Network. "You and I are old friends, man. You can't turn down a simple request like that, especially when the character of a clever young scientist is at stake."

"I've no choice in the matter," the President responded. "If I could help, I would, but the fact that Carton comes into it makes all the difference. Pity you mentioned that, otherwise I could have granted permission."

"Is there some conspiracy against Carton, or what?" Latham snapped, banging his fist on the desk.

"No conspiracy—just an order from the police that no outside aid is to be granted him. He is to have a trial in the normal legal way. Anything—er—fantastic is barred. And to attempt to communicate with Venus would be considered that."

"But, blast it, it's the only way to prove his innocence!"

"Sorry," the President said, shaking his head.

"Of all the bone-headed, woolly-minded dimwits!" Latham clenched his fists. "I never saw anything like it! Why, even a murderer gets a better break than this! Carton didn't kill anybody, or hadn't you noticed?"

"Matters against Carton are blacker than you seem to think," the President said. "That's off the cuff, Doctor. But in my position, at the head of broadcasting, I've a good idea of public opinion. People are commencing to say that he's working in collusion with certain factions on Venus who want to overthrow us. They're also saying that if this Time-bunkum *is* true, then Carton probably caused it—but something went wrong and everybody came to life again."

"Such infernal piffle!" Latham roared, jumping up. "I'm not listening to any more of it! Why must people always think the worst instead of the best— You—you make me sick!"

And he left the Radio Headquarters in a towering rage and went straight home to do some hard thinking. He was in a position where his skill as a scientist went for nothing, it seemed. It was all the more infuriating because the trouble had been caused by him in the first place. . . .

Inevitably the law ploughed along on its juggernaut course, and six weeks after the restoration of Time, Peter and Ada found themselves facing the court, presided over by a

judge who could not have looked more unscientific. The jury too, had no person present who resembled Einstein. To prove a Time theory to such as these was going to be nearly impossible.

Pascal knew it and mopped his forehead under his wig as he surveyed the court, then his brief.

The Public Prosecutor sounded formidable, and armed with such a list of charges he had good reason to be. Ranged against the hapless Peter were Kembley's Bank, Marvern and Kennedy, and the Scientific Institute. This last organisation had turned a deaf ear to all Latham's pleas to drop their case. The President was insistent that transgressors must be punished, which showed the mistake of having a President who was not a practical scientist.

"Deliberate vandalism and robbery, ladies and gentlemen of the jury," the Prosecutor said, emphasising the case. "We have in our midst—or did have until the law acted—a criminal of singular scientific brilliance, a criminal who can render his victims completely unaware of his actions. In every case the crimes referred to were committed without a single soul knowing about them! How, you ask? How could explosive be used in a busy quarter of London without attracting attention? How? By the simple process of stopping Time for a certain area around the scene of the crime. That is what the prisoner and his wife did."

Pascal looked up in wonder, trying to imagine what sort of a twist the case was taking. The Prosecutor gave him a malicious glance of triumph and continued: "By a means that cannot yet be proven the prisoner obtained a plan of Dr. Latham's Electronic Brain, which is capable of stopping the action of Time within a certain area. The prisoner then flew into space with his wife and, apparently, reached Venus. We have no reason to disbelieve that. We contend that whilst he was there he was helped by Venusian scientists to build an Electronic Brain within his space machine. It was to be tested on Earth and, if it proved successful in stopping Time's action over certain areas, then it would make an immensely powerful weapon to stabilise a Venusian invasion of this planet. But the prisoner was more interested in his own immediate gains, and he also wanted to remove opposition. So, first, he caused London within a given area to be brought to a standstill. During that period he wrecked Dr. Latham's own Electronic Brain, which could have proven a later danger—and then removed the plan of it so as to make re-building a most difficult task, even for Dr. Latham. The theft from Marvern and Kennedy was, we assume, to make replacements to the Electronic Brain within the space ship. . . . But something went wrong, and Time-paralysis failed. It was at this point that the law acted and the prisoner and his wife were arrested."

"Are you endeavouring to prove," the judge asked, "that Time *was* halted, as the prisoner contends? As Dr. Latham also contends?"

"The Prosecution believes so, m'lud, but the exact period is unknown. Probably just long enough to commit the crimes referred to."

"No more than a matter of hours then?"

"Probably not even that long, m'lud. It was quite a clever trick. Very few people can swear to within half an hour how much time has passed, unless some special reason keeps them looking at a clock."

"This is balderdash!" Latham shouted, leaping up.

"You will be called in turn, Doctor," the judge told him, and sat back to listen to another remarkable feat of twisted facts from the Prosecutor. Until at last the case against Peter and Ada had been stated. They glanced at one another in baffled wonder. Then Pascal rose, calling Dr. Latham as his first witness.

“Probably,” Latham said, when he had been sworn in and identified himself, “I am the most injured party in this whole ridiculous, fantastic business! It is *my* invention which is being tossed about so casually! Mine! The idiotic suggestion that Mr. Carton—the prisoner—obtained a plan of the machine separately from the one in the bank is sheer rubbish. There never was one. The Prosecutor is just trying to make a case of shaky facts because a few miserable organisations are concerned about their premises being broken into! I tell you, my lord—and you in the jury there—that on March 19th a year ago Time stopped *dead*. At exactly eleven-forty in the evening. It was the evening on which my Electronic Brain had been left to explain the riddle of Time. It should have found the answer by the next evening, but in the course of its postulating it accidentally—or rather deliberately, since it was a mechanical action—barred the normal track of Time by inquiring too closely into the nature of non-Time instants. From that second the machine and Time stopped. It would still be stopped if Mr. Carton and his wife hadn’t returned from Venus and seen what had occurred.”

“And why were they not involved in this supposed Time halt?” the judge asked.

“Because their bodies are synthetic, of Venusian material, and not bound by the law of Time governing this planet.”

“Mmmm,” the judge mused. “Please continue, Doctor.”

## CHAPTER EIGHT

Altogether Latham talked for nearly fifteen minutes with barely a pause, except to answer a direct question from either the judge, Pascal, or the Prosecutor. Just what the judge thought about the scientific explanation was not clear. He was completely poker-faced and remained so whilst Minnie Carstairs, called as a witness, also made her statement.

"I haven't solved it yet!" Minnie declared, when she had come to the end of her story. "It was as though in one flash I was moved several yards from where I was standing. There was no apparent interruption."

"Which bears out my assertion," the Prosecutor declared, rising. "Miss Carstairs, in common with everybody else, was caught up in a Time-blockage created by the prisoner. If a man can stop Time whenever he wishes, what is to prevent him doing just anything he likes?"

"You are out of order, Mr. Prosecutor," the judge said briefly. "At the moment the defence counsel has the floor. What you have just said will be ignored."

The Prosecutor sat down again and glared. Tirelessly, Pascal called one witness after another. He called the Three Flying Daredevils, and since there were still three of them they had evidently patched up their differences. He also called Miss Honoria Simpkins. In detail, the man who had found himself on the floor of the circus explained the queerness of the circumstances, and Miss Simpkins extracted the maximum amount of drama from finding an unexplained handkerchief in her hand.

"All of which," Pascal finished, "proves beyond doubt—even in these isolated instances—that something did happen to Time. It could have been in the brief period stated by the Prosecutor; but I also maintain it could have been in the twelve-month lapse insisted on by my client. I cannot prove my contention, but neither can the Prosecutor. On those grounds, m'lud, I ask that the prisoner be released with his wife, because of insufficient evidence."

Pascal sat down again wondering if he had made any impression. He watched the Prosecutor narrowly as he stood up to add his own statement.

"The charge against the prisoner is not one of unlawful entry alone," he said. "He, and his wife, are both accused of conniving with the inhabitants of another planet to the detriment of this world. They are also accused of using scientific equipment, invented by Dr. Latham, for the sole purpose of paralysing the activity of all or part of this planet. The evidence that has been given shows that Time was tampered with in some degree. In summing the matter up, ladies and gentlemen of the jury, remember that the space machine of the prisoners is filled with Time-controlling equipment. That cannot be explained away. It was put there by the scientists of Venus. Had the prisoners wished to construct a second machine on Earth here—a second Electronic Brain that is—they would surely not have put it in their space machine. The nearby Executive Building of the air-park would have been a better choice."

"Not when we had only our space machine power plant to rely on," Peter pointed out.

The Prosecutor ignored the remark and continued remorselessly: "Dr. Latham has spoken on behalf of the prisoners and supported them in every way possible, chiefly because he is a scientist and not particularly alert to the subtlety of this plan aimed against the world. I believe. . . ."

And the Prosecutor went on and on, ramming home his points. He had a job to do, and did it thoroughly. When he had finished the members of the jury were looking at each other.

“You will remember,” the judge instructed them, “that the charge against the prisoners is conspiracy against Earth and unlawful entry, the weapon used being a stolen Electronic Brain plan.”

Not at all sure they knew what they had to decide, so utterly complicated was the issue, the jury retired. Peter and Ada found themselves taken into the waiting-room below and there they sat together, the door guarded. It was not long before Pascal and Latham joined them.

“Well, how’s chances?” Peter asked grimly, and the lawyer sighed.

“Not too bright, I’m afraid. The Prosecutor turned our own guns against us by also using the Time stoppage as his main plank. The whole thing is in the balance. He cannot prove that Time really stopped—but then neither can we. So I imagine the verdict will be based on whichever the jury thinks is the most convincing argument.”

“Neither of them are convincing,” Latham snapped. “In fact I never heard a case with such flimsy, insupportable evidence. This case would never have assumed such proportions if there were not so many people on this planet, both paid agents and otherwise, who are ready to foment the ‘invasion’ threat on the least pretext. That is what it amounts to. It used to be fear of invasion by another country—now it’s fear of invasion from another planet. Deep down,” Latham mused, “it can all be attributed to jealousy. The majority are afraid of somebody who can stop Time.”

“If the thing goes badly what do we get?” Ada asked anxiously.

Pascal was silent, his face drawn.

“You might as well tell us,” Peter prompted him. “We have not the least idea what we’re facing.”

“If things go wrong,” Latham said bluntly, “you’ll get the death penalty. No use wrapping it up.”

Ada started. “What! The *death* penalty for just breaking into the——”

“The death penalty for conspiracy. That is what the prosecution is trying to prove. If only you hadn’t built the second Electronic Brain in your spaceship! That is what has given the Prosecutor his main weapon— Yes, yes, I know you had to for reasons of power.”

“We could tear this whole thing wide open and win our point if we could prove twelve months have elapsed since March 19th, 1970,” Pascal said. “But that brings us back where we were. We can’t prove it by people’s actions, by the vegetation, by anything at all. The mistake was in allowing the exact twelve months to pass. If it had been six months and we’d awakened to autumn we’d have proved our point.”

“But we didn’t,” Latham said, sighing. “There’s got to be another answer, and I don’t know why the devil I can’t think of one.”

He had no more opportunity to say anything further for the call had come for the court to reassemble. In silence, ready for the worst, Peter and Ada returned above and stood watching the jury reassemble. Finally the judge eyed the foreman.

“Have you reached a verdict?” the judge asked.

“We have, my lord. We find the evidence insufficient to convict the prisoners, and on the other hand we find the circumstances too dubious to permit of them going free. We therefore suggest a term of imprisonment of a duration not less than twenty years.”

“What!” Peter gasped, utterly shaken.

“For conspiracy,” the judge told him, “the penalty is death. You have been reprieved from the ultimate sentence, therefore I have to pass judgment upon you. You have heard the verdict, and though I am not in agreement with it, in that I believe you and your wife deliberately



conspired to flout the laws of Nature for personal gain, I am nevertheless a dispenser of the law and nothing more. I sentence you both to twenty years in the——”

What happened after that was drowned out by the confusion which hit the court. Everybody started talking at once and reporters got on the move for the nearest telephone. Latham sat in total silence, chin on chest, only arousing himself when Pascal touched him on the shoulder.

“Sorry,” the lawyer apologised. “I did what I could, but without proof of the passage of Time my hands are tied.”

“I know,” Latham growled. “You did what you could. Anyway, those two are still alive—and will be, so they can be released the moment we can prove our point. And I’m going to.”

“How?” the lawyer asked, as Latham got to his feet.

“I’m going to communicate with Venus somehow—even if I have to build my own transmitter, or my own spaceship. Things just can’t stay like this!”

And, muttering to himself, Latham left the crowded courtroom.

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Latham found his notion of building a space machine was very soon scotched. Now the trial was over the Government had taken the space machine into custody and, Peter and Ada being deprived of all civil rights, the Government was claiming the copyright of the machine. It would only be a matter of a few months before new space machines would be turned out.

“In fact space travel has arrived, and the two who invented it and risked their lives for it, even to the extent of being patched up with new bodies, are thrown into prison to rot?” Latham demanded of the high official he had contacted.

“The activity of the law is no concern of mine, Doctor;” the official shrugged. “Condemned prisoners forfeit all rights. You know that. So——”

“So the Government steals the invention, eh?” Latham’s eyes glinted. “Believe me there’s going to be one hell of a compensation to be paid for this before you’re finished. I’m going to prove that those two in jail are not guilty, and when that happens the Government will have to pay for everything they’ve appropriated.”

The official was undisturbed. “Whatever the legal procedure is, in the case of Mr. and Mrs. Carton being freed, it will be adopted,” he said.

Latham left, his brow dark. It was the utter injustice of everything which was making him boil, and the fact that he himself was also in bad odour. Instead of his Electronic Brain taking its place in the ranks of scientific achievements as he had hoped, nobody was interested any more. In fact everybody seemed afraid of it—so under these conditions it was no use building a new one. Years of labour had been just thrown away. As for the second Electronic Brain, which had been in the space ship—the Government had presumably got that too.

“And just let them dare to use it!” Latham vowed. “That invention is *mine*, even if it was copied.”

So being baulked in the matter of building a space machine—and he certainly could not contact either Peter or Ada in their respective penitentiaries—Latham went to work on radio apparatus, using all his skill to build the most sensitive short-wave transmitter he could devise. It was a fortnight later, and he was half-way through the job, when an unpleasant thought occurred to him. If, as Peter had said, the Venusians only communicated by thought-waves, how could they send an answer over radio? Unless, with their scientific methods, they could make thoughts sound like speech. Latham had no fears on the matter of a receiver; the one he possessed was quite keen enough to pick up any message from Venus, but the thought-wave

angle *did* bother him. The only answer seemed to be that, if he did not get a reply, he would have to rely on the Venusians, or at least their leader, coming to Earth to clear matters up.

Satisfied on this point Latham went on building, and it took him until the middle of the summer to finish the apparatus. It was not half an hour after he had sent his communication forth that he found himself visited by a Transmission Inspector. This uniformed individual was polite, but firm.

“Presumably, Dr. Latham, your message was directed at Venus?” he asked, when Latham had admitted him.

“Certainly. . . .” Latham led the way into his basement laboratory. “What about it? I’m entitled to do as I wish with my own apparatus, am I not?”

“Within limits, sir. Sending transmission to Venus, however, is not permitted. I’m afraid your message was intercepted and electrically scrambled. It would not reach its destination.”

Latham stared in amazement for a moment. Then his face reddened.

“You have the monumental nerve to stand there and tell me you have interfered with——”

“Not I, personally, Dr. Latham. The Transmission Authorities. I think I should make it clear to you that since the Carton case the laws relating to radio transmission have been greatly tightened up. The authorities are convinced that some subterfuge with Venus is on foot . . .” The Inspector paused and then added quietly, “If you were not such an eminent man, Dr. Latham, you *could* be arrested for suspected treason. Anybody trying to communicate with Venus is immediately under observation.”

Latham smiled sourly. “So the old bugbear of possible invasion by the Venusians is still there, is it?”

“Public interest, sir. Must be protected.”

“But, my stars, man, don’t you realise that——” Latham came to a stop, his hand partly upraised, a look of profound amazement on his face. The Inspector waited, a trifle surprised.

“You were saying, Doctor?”

“Eh?” Latham looked at him absently. “Saying? Who was?”

“*You* were, sir. I——”

“Just leave me alone,” Latham interrupted impatiently. “And thanks for telling me of the regulations. I shan’t transgress again. Shan’t need to, in fact.”

The Inspector nodded, completely puzzled by the sudden change in Latham’s manner. He departed with a sense of duty discharged. Latham remained standing beside his work bench, thinking, then he snapped his fingers.

“My stars!” he repeated. “What a crass idiot I’ve been. Now why didn’t I think of that before?”

Five minutes later he was leaving his home and he finished his journey at the Greenwich Observatory. Being well-known to the Curator he had no difficulty in securing an interview with him.

“How do you find your observations?” Latham asked, a curious grin on his face.

The Curator looked puzzled. “How do I *find* them?”

“I mean is everything as it should be? Your solar charts, stellar movements, and so forth?”

“Well, now you mention it, no,” the Curator confessed. “I haven’t released any details because the public is not really interested in the work of an astronomer and his staff. I can talk to you, though, and frankly I don’t think our departments have ever been in such a mess.”

“Good!” Latham said complacently.

“Good? On the contrary——”

“It’s good to me,” Latham continued. “What you mean is, nothing will check up? Your ordinary calculations are utterly at sea. That it?”

“That’s it. Just as though we’d been closed down for a long time and taking no daily observations—— Oh, a shocking mess!”

“Then you can derive consolation from the fact that the shocking mess will probably free two innocent people from prison. Now look,” Latham added, leaning forward intently, “I want several star-plates from you—only on loan. I’ll guarantee their safety . . .”

He had to use all his influence to gain what he required but in the end he succeeded. Towards lunch-time he appeared at the legal chambers of Judge Cranby, who had tried the case of Peter and Ada. Cranby was in his office, absorbed in some case or other, and his greeting was none too effusive.

“I’m afraid you’re wasting your time, Doctor, if you have come to make an appeal for the release of the Cartons,” he said, motioning to a chair. “They’ve been convicted, and that ends the situation.”

“I don’t think it does,” Latham replied, and laying his parcel of plates on the desk he unwrapped them and spread them out. There were eight all told, photographed with Greenwich’s best photo-reflector.

“Well?” the Judge asked, contemplating them and then glancing up. “I am not a scientist, Dr. Latham. What do these imply?”

“These four plates——” Latham singled them out. “These four plates represent the northern sky on March 18th, 1970, a day before Time came to a stop. Even though you are not a scientist, sir, you can surely recognise the various constellations and fixed stars?”

“Yes, yes. So?”

“And these four plates,” Latham handed over the remaining four, “were photographed as part of the normal observatory routine on March 19th, 1970, a night later. Now, study them, compare them with the others. You will notice the hair-cross on the picture which represents the north meridian in the camera lens.”

Frowning, the Judge scrutinised the plates carefully, then he looked up.

“There appears to be some change of position,” he commented. “Only natural in the course of twenty-four hours surely from one night to the other?”

“The change of position from one night to the other is not noticeable,” Latham answered deliberately. “Certainly not in the case of the fixed stars. These two sets of plates, supposedly taken one night after the other, represent a difference of exactly twelve months’ interval! Figures prove it. The sky does not lie. Its mathematics are absolute!”

Cranby’s eyebrows began to rise. “Then, good heavens, this means——”

“It means, as I have affirmed all along, that Peter Carton and his wife spoke the truth, Judge! On March 18th, 1970, the first four plates were taken. On March 19th, 1971, a year later, the second four plates were taken, the astronomers thinking they were continuing without any break. There’s panic in the astronomical world at the moment. A whole year’s figures are missing and the sidereal universe has moved on twelve months. You can call any astronomer in the world to testify and every man will tell you the same thing. Mathematics show beyond a shadow of doubt that we are all twelve months further on in Time than we believe!”

[*Transcriber’s Note: Duplicated line in text has been removed; correct line is missing.*] a grim smile.

"I congratulate you, Doctor," he said quietly. "You have found that incontestable proof which was needed, by one side or the other. The sky cannot lie, of course . . . Odd we never thought of this simple answer at first."

"Human beings are more inclined to look at the ground," Latham replied. "I only got the notion when I exclaimed 'My stars!' by the merest chance. Then it dawned on me! The stars! Of course, they couldn't change since they were right outside the Time stoppage. This tears the Prosecutor's theory to bits. No man with criminal intent would need to paralyse the world for twelve months whilst he performed a crime . . . Time *did* stop, and because of their ingenuity, and their courage in a dead and motionless world, Peter and Ada Carton corrected the fatal error which my Electronic Brain had made."

Cranby reached for the telephone. "There'll be a re-trial at once," he said. "Let me have the names of all the important astronomers throughout the world."

Latham provided them and thereafter Judge Cranby did not waste any time. In a matter of two weeks the re-trial commenced and no court of law was ever graced by more distinguished scientists in the astronomical branch. In the space of two hours the jury brought in their verdict of unconditional release of the two prisoners.

"And it doesn't end just there," Latham told them, as he entertained them both to dinner in his home that evening. "The law is going to have to pay a tremendous compensation for such a miscarriage of justice. Even more so in your case because you actually saved everybody from eternal paralysis. *I'll* see that they pay, believe me—and I'll see to it that you get your space machine back and that all plans which have been made of it are destroyed. First thing you must do is get that machine and its motive power patented, then the Government cannot step in and cheat you of your reward. I'm also arranging a public function for this time next week, not only to have you feted for being the first two people to fly the void to Venus and back, but also for your wonderful feat in turning Time back to normal."

Ada laughed. "You forget, Doctor, that we could not have done anything without your 'stolen' blueprint to work from. You created—we copied."

"And how are things going to be caught up—for the missing year?" Peter asked. "What are the astronomers going to do about it?"

Latham shrugged. "What *can* they do? They can only fill in the missing blanks and record it for posterity as a period when all activity ceased. For all we know wonderful things may have happened out in the Universe during that year, of which we shall never be aware . . . There is another reaction to the Time-gap, too. I feel, and I gather other people do, that it *has* left an impression—a curious, inexplicable hangover in the consciousness. I suppose it will remain with each man, woman, and child as long as they live. It may mean less keen thinkers in the next generation until the condition is healed by the passage of centuries."

There was silence in the brightly-lighted room for a moment. Then Ada asked a question: "And your Electronic Brain, Doctor? Now the trouble has been cleared up you'll be demonstrating it once again to the scientists, I take it?"

Latham shook his head and his mouth hardened slightly.

"No?" Peter asked in surprise. "But why not? It's one of the greatest thinking machines of the age——"

"That," Latham said, "is just the trouble. It is much *too* ingenious. For a long time science has feared the machine which might prove cleverer than its creator, and I think the Electronic Brain is just such an instrument. I can now put in an application to the Government to have the space machine entrusted to me, and I can also demand the destruction of any plans relating

to it. Here is the complete set of drawings of the Brain,” he explained, “including the one you took from the Bank, Mr. Carton. And this is what I intend doing with them.”

Before either Ada or Peter could stop him Latham had torn the sheets across and flung them in the low-burned fire. They crinkled, charred, and burst into flame.

“Better that way,” Latham muttered, watching the sparks sweep into the chimney.

Peter and Ada said nothing. Then Latham added, “I shall take consolation from the fact that I shall be a valuable member of your space-travel company. I will have Pascal see to it that a company is floated at the earliest possible moment, and as the founders of such a project I imagine neither of you will have anything to fear financially in the future.”

Peter and Ada smiled and glanced at each other. When they looked at Latham again he had returned his attention to the fire and was contemplating blackened sheets. He looked like a man who has lost his first-born child.

THE END

## TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Numerous mis-spelled words and printer errors have been fixed.

[The end of *The Petrified Planet* by John Russell Fearn (as Vargo Statten)]