THE METAL MONSTER

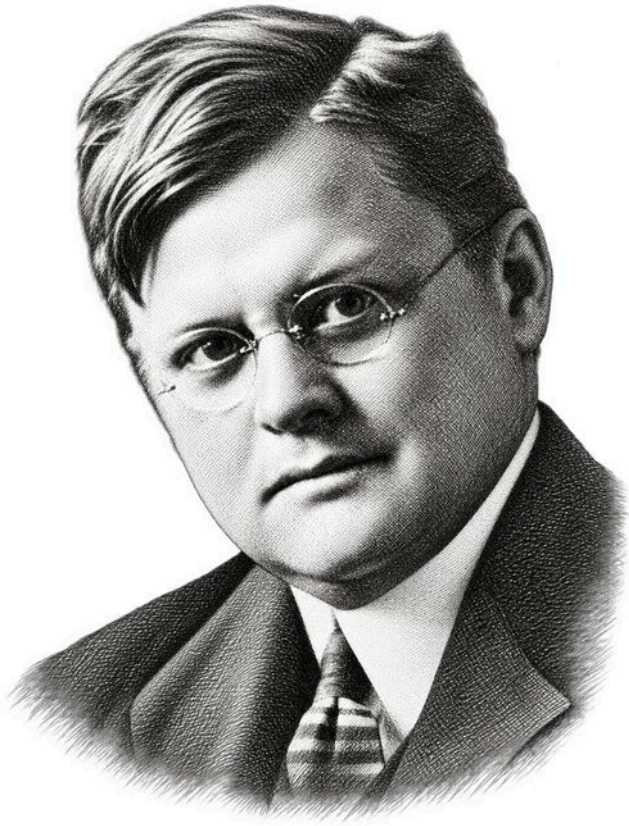


A. MERRITT

The Metal Monster

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THE AUTHOR



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1884 - 1943

AI-created interpretation after historical photograph, circa 1920.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

A. Merritt

Abraham Merritt, known to readers as A. Merritt, was an American journalist, editor and writer of fantastic fiction. He was born in Beverly, New Jersey, in 1884. Newspaper work occupied much of his professional life, and he eventually became editor-in-chief of *The American Weekly*.

His fiction developed alongside that demanding editorial career. He began publishing fantastic stories in 1917, and *The Moon Pool* appeared in book form in 1919. *The Metal Monster* followed as a magazine serial in 1920. These works combine adventure with encounters that unsettle familiar explanations of the natural world.

Other novels include *The Ship of Ishtar* and *The Dwellers in the Mirage*. Merritt revised some works repeatedly, so their publication histories can be complicated. His richly described imagined worlds attracted a devoted readership and influenced later fantasy and science-fiction writers. He died in 1943.

Readers can notice the relationship between wonder and danger. An extraordinary light, sound or structure may be attractive before its significance becomes clear. The narrators often try to describe unfamiliar beings through comparisons with things they already know, revealing the limits of those comparisons. Following these attempts can make the descriptive passages part of the action: each new observation changes what the characters believe is possible.

Biographical references: The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction. Portrait source: historical photograph, circa 1920. Full source records retained in the edition archive.

PROLOGUE

Before the narrative which follows was placed in my hands, I had never seen Dr. Walter T. Goodwin, its author.

When the manuscript revealing his adventures among the pre-historic ruins of the Nan-Matal in the Carolines (The Moon Pool) had been given me by the International Association of Science for editing and revision to meet the requirements of a popular presentation, Dr. Goodwin had left America. He had explained that he was still too shaken, too depressed, to be able to recall experiences that must inevitably carry with them freshened memories of those whom he loved so well and from whom, he felt, he was separated in all probability forever.

I had understood that he had gone to some remote part of Asia to pursue certain botanical studies, and it was therefore with the liveliest surprise and interest that I received a summons from the President of the Association to meet Dr. Goodwin at a designated place and hour.

Through my close study of the Moon Pool papers I had formed a mental image of their writer. I had read, too, those volumes of botanical research which have set him high above all other American scientists in this field, gleaning from their curious mingling of extremely technical observations and minutely accurate but extraordinarily poetic descriptions, hints to amplify my picture of him. It gratified me to find I had drawn a pretty good one.

The man to whom the President of the Association introduced me was sturdy, well-knit, a little under average height. He had a broad but rather low forehead that reminded me somewhat of the late electrical wizard Steinmetz. Under level black brows shone eyes of clear hazel, kindly, shrewd, a little wistful, lightly humorous; the eyes both of a doer and a dreamer.

Not more than forty I judged him to be. A close-trimmed, pointed beard did not hide the firm chin and the clean-cut mouth. His hair was thick and black and oddly sprinkled with white; small streaks and dots of gleaming silver that shone with a curiously metallic luster.

His right arm was closely bound to his breast. His manner as he greeted me was tinged with shyness. He extended his left hand in greeting, and as I clasped the fingers I was struck by their peculiar, pronounced, yet pleasant warmth; a sensation, indeed, curiously electric.

The Association's President forced him gently back into his chair.

“Dr. Goodwin,” he said, turning to me, “is not entirely recovered as yet from certain consequences of his adventures. He will explain to you later what these are. In the meantime, Mr. Merritt, will you read this?”

I took the sheets he handed me, and as I read them felt the gaze of Dr. Goodwin full upon me, searching, weighing, estimating. When I raised my eyes from the letter I found in his a new expression. The shyness was gone; they were filled with complete friendliness. Evidently I had passed muster.

“You will accept, sir?” It was the president's gravely courteous tone.

“Accept!” I exclaimed. “Why, of course, I accept. It is not only one of the greatest honors, but to me one of the greatest delights to act as a collaborator with Dr. Goodwin.”

The president smiled.

“In that case, sir, there is no need for me to remain longer,” he said. “Dr. Goodwin has with him his manuscript as far as he has progressed with it. I will leave you two alone for your discussion.”

He bowed to us and, picking up his old-fashioned bell-crowned silk hat and his quaint, heavy cane of ebony, withdrew. Dr. Goodwin turned to me.

“I will start,” he said, after a little pause, “from when I met Richard Drake on the field of blue poppies that are like a great prayer-rug at the gray feet of the nameless mountain.”

The sun sank, the shadows fell, the lights of the city sparkled out, for hours New York roared about me unheeded while I listened to the tale of that utterly weird, stupendous drama of an unknown life, of unknown creatures, unknown forces, and of unconquerable human heroism played among the hidden gorges of unknown Asia.

It was dawn when I left him for my own home. Nor was it for many hours after that I laid his then incomplete manuscript down and sought sleep—and found a troubled sleep.

A. MERRITT

CHAPTER I. VALLEY OF THE BLUE POPPIES

In this great crucible of life we call the world—in the vaster one we call the universe—the mysteries lie close packed, uncountable as grains of sand on ocean's shores. They thread gigantic, the star-flung spaces; they creep, atomic, beneath the microscope's peering eye. They walk beside us, unseen and unheard, calling out to us, asking why we are deaf to their crying, blind to their wonder.

Sometimes the veils drop from a man's eyes, and he sees—and speaks of his vision. Then those who have not seen pass him by with the lifted brows of disbelief, or they mock him, or if his vision has been great enough they fall upon and destroy him.

For the greater the mystery, the more bitterly is its verity assailed; upon what seem the lesser a man may give testimony and at least gain for himself a hearing.

There is reason for this. Life is a ferment, and upon and about it, shifting and changing, adding to or taking away, beat over legions of forces, seen and unseen, known and unknown. And man, an atom in the ferment, clings desperately to what to him seems stable; nor greets with joy him who hazards that what he grips may be but a broken staff, and, so saying, fails to hold forth a sturdier one.

Earth is a ship, plowing her way through uncharted oceans of space wherein are strange currents, hidden shoals and reefs, and where blow the unknown winds of Cosmos.

If to the voyagers, painfully plotting their course, comes one who cries that their charts must be remade, nor can tell WHY they must be—that man is not welcome—no!

Therefore it is that men have grown chary of giving testimony upon mysteries. Yet knowing each in his own heart the truth of that vision he has himself beheld, lo, it is that in whose reality he most believes.

The spot where I had encamped was of a singular beauty; so beautiful that it caught the throat and set an ache within the breast—until from it a tranquillity distilled that was like healing mist.

Since early March I had been wandering. It was now mid-July. And for the first time since my pilgrimage had begun I drank—not of forgetfulness, for that could never be—but of anodyne for a sorrow which had held fast upon me since my return from the Carolines a year before.

No need to dwell here upon that—it has been written. Nor shall I recite the reasons for my restlessness—for these are known to those who have read that history of mine. Nor is there cause to set forth at length the steps by which I had arrived at this vale of peace.

Sufficient is to tell that in New York one night, reading over what is perhaps the most sensational of my books—"The Poppies and Primulas of Southern Tibet," the result of my travels of 1910-1911, I determined to return to that quiet, forbidden land. There, if anywhere, might I find something akin to forgetting.

There was a certain flower which I long had wished to study in its mutations from the singular forms appearing on the southern slopes of the Elburz—Persia's mountainous chain that extends from Azerbaijan in the west to Khorasan in the east; from thence I would follow its modified types in the Hindu-Kush ranges and its migrations along the southern scarps of the Trans-Himalayas—the unexplored upheaval, higher than the Himalayas themselves, more deeply cut with precipice and gorge, which Sven Hedin had touched and named on his journey to Lhasa.

Having accomplished this, I planned to push across the passes to the Manasarowar Lakes, where, legend has it, the strange, luminous purple lotuses grow.

An ambitious project, undeniably fraught with danger; but it is written that desperate diseases require desperate remedies, and until inspiration or message how to rejoin those whom I had loved so dearly came to me, nothing less, I felt, could dull my heartache.

And, frankly, feeling that no such inspiration or message could come, I did not much care as to the end.

In Teheran I had picked up a most unusual servant; yes, more than this, a companion and counselor and interpreter as well.

He was a Chinese; his name Chiu-Ming. His first thirty years had been spent at the great Lamasery of Palkhor-Choinde at Gyantse, west of Lhasa. Why he had gone from there, how he had come to

Teheran, I never asked. It was most fortunate that he had gone, and that I had found him. He recommended himself to me as the best cook within ten thousand miles of Pekin.

For almost three months we had journeyed; Chiu-Ming and I and the two ponies that carried my impedimenta.

We had traversed mountain roads which had echoed to the marching feet of the hosts of Darius, to the hordes of the Satraps. The highways of the Achaemenids—yes, and which before them had trembled to the tramplings of the myriads of the godlike Dravidian conquerors.

We had slipped over ancient Iranian trails; over paths which the warriors of conquering Alexander had traversed; dust of bones of Macedons, of Greeks, of Romans, beat about us; ashes of the flaming ambitions of the Sassanidae whimpered beneath our feet—the feet of an American botanist, a Chinaman, two Tibetan ponies. We had crept through clefts whose walls had sent back the howlings of the Ephthalites, the White Huns who had sapped the strength of these same proud Sassanids until at last both fell before the Turks.

Over the highways and byways of Persia's glory, Persia's shame and Persia's death we four—two men, two beasts—had passed. For a fortnight we had met no human soul, seen no sign of human habitation.

Game had been plentiful—green things Chiu-Ming might lack for his cooking, but meat never. About us was a welter of mighty summits. We were, I knew, somewhere within the blending of the Hindu-Kush with the Trans-Himalayas.

That morning we had come out of a ragged defile into this valley of enchantment, and here, though it had been so early, I had pitched my tent, determining to go no farther till the morrow.

It was a Phocean vale; a gigantic cup filled with tranquillity. A spirit brooded over it, serene, majestic, immutable—like the untroubled calm which rests, the Burmese believe, over every place which has guarded the Buddha, sleeping.

At its eastern end towered the colossal scarp of the unnamed peak through one of whose gorges we had crept. On his head was a cap of silver set with pale emeralds—the snow fields and glaciers that crowned him. Far to the west another gray and ochreous giant

reared its bulk, closing the vale. North and south, the horizon was a chaotic sky land of pinnacles, spired and minareted, steepled and turreted and domed, each diademed with its green and argent of eternal ice and snow.

And all the valley was carpeted with the blue poppies in wide, unbroken fields, luminous as the morning skies of mid-June; they rippled mile after mile over the path we had followed, over the still untrodden path which we must take. They nodded, they leaned toward each other, they seemed to whisper—then to lift their heads and look up like crowding swarms of little azure fays, half impudently, wholly trustfully, into the faces of the jeweled giants standing guard over them. And when the little breeze walked upon them it was as though they bent beneath the soft tread and were brushed by the sweeping skirts of unseen, hastening Presences.

Like a vast prayer-rug, sapphire and silken, the poppies stretched to the gray feet of the mountain. Between their southern edge and the clustering summits a row of faded brown, low hills knelt—like brown-robed, withered and weary old men, backs bent, faces hidden between outstretched arms, palms to the earth and brows touching earth within them—in the East's immemorial attitude of worship.

I half expected them to rise—and as I watched a man appeared on one of the bowed, rocky shoulders, abruptly, with the ever-startling suddenness which in the strange light of these latitudes objects spring into vision. As he stood scanning my camp there arose beside him a laden pony, and at its head a Tibetan peasant. The first figure waved its hand; came striding down the hill.

As he approached I took stock of him. A young giant, three good inches over six feet, a vigorous head with unruly clustering black hair; a clean-cut, clean-shaven American face.

“I'm Dick Drake,” he said, holding out his hand. “Richard Keen Drake, recently with Uncle's engineers in France.”

“My name is Goodwin.” I took his hand, shook it warmly. “Dr. Walter T. Goodwin.”

“Goodwin the botanist—? Then I know you!” he exclaimed. “Know all about you, that is. My father admired your work greatly. You knew him—Professor Alvin Drake.”

I nodded. So he was Alvin Drake's son. Alvin, I knew, had died about a year before I had started on this journey. But what was his son doing in this wilderness?

“Wondering where I came from?” he answered my unspoken question. “Short story. War ended. Felt an irresistible desire for something different. Couldn't think of anything more different from Tibet—always wanted to go there anyway. Went. Decided to strike over toward Turkestan. And here I am.”

I felt at once a strong liking for this young giant. No doubt, subconsciously, I had been feeling the need of companionship with my own kind. I even wondered, as I led the way into my little camp, whether he would care to join fortunes with me in my journeyings.

His father's work I knew well, and although this stalwart lad was unlike what one would have expected Alvin Drake—a trifle dried, precise, wholly abstracted with his experiments—to beget, still, I reflected, heredity like the Lord sometimes works in mysterious ways its wonders to perform.

It was almost with awe that he listened to me instruct Chiu-Ming as to just how I wanted supper prepared, and his gaze dwelt fondly upon the Chinese busy among his pots and pans.

We talked a little, desultorily, as the meal was prepared—fragments of traveler's news and gossip, as is the habit of journeyers who come upon each other in the silent places. Ever the speculation grew in his face as he made away with Chiu-Ming's artful concoctions.

Drake sighed, drawing out his pipe.

“A cook, a marvel of a cook. Where did you get him?”

Briefly I told him.

Then a silence fell upon us. Suddenly the sun dipped down behind the flank of the stone giant guarding the valley's western gate; the whole vale swiftly darkened—a flood of crystal-clear shadows poured within it. It was the prelude to that miracle of unearthly beauty seen nowhere else on this earth—the sunset of Tibet.

We turned expectant eyes to the west. A little, cool breeze raced down from the watching steeps like a messenger, whispered to the nodding poppies, sighed and was gone. The poppies were still. High overhead a homing kite whistled, mellowly.

As if it were a signal there sprang out in the pale azure of the western sky row upon row of cirrus cloudlets, rank upon rank of them, thrusting their heads into the path of the setting sun. They changed from mottled silver into faint rose, deepened to crimson.

"The dragons of the sky drink the blood of the sunset," said Chiu-Ming.

As though a gigantic globe of crystal had dropped upon the heavens, their blue turned swiftly to a clear and glowing amber—then as abruptly shifted to a luminous violet A soft green light pulsed through the valley.

Under it, like hills ensorcelled, the rocky walls about it seemed to flatten. They glowed and all at once pressed forward like gigantic slices of palest emerald jade, translucent, illumined, as though by a circlet of little suns shining behind them.

The light faded, robes of deepest amethyst dropped around the mountain's mighty shoulders. And then from every snow and glacier-crowned peak, from minaret and pinnacle and towering turret, leaped forth a confusion of soft peacock flames, a host of irised prismatic gleamings, an ordered chaos of rainbows.

Great and small, interlacing and shifting, they ringed the valley with an incredible glory—as if some god of light itself had touched the eternal rocks and bidden radiant souls stand forth.

Through the darkening sky swept a rosy pencil of living light; that utterly strange, pure beam whose coming never fails to clutch the throat of the beholder with the hand of ecstasy, the ray which the Tibetans name the Ting-Pa. For a moment this rosy finger pointed to the east, then arched itself, divided slowly into six shining, rosy bands; began to creep downward toward the eastern horizon where a nebulous, pulsing splendor arose to meet it.

And as we watched I heard a gasp from Drake. And it was echoed by my own.

For the six beams were swaying, moving with ever swifter motion from side to side in ever-widening sweep, as though the hidden orb from which they sprang were swaying like a pendulum.

Faster and faster the six high-flung beams swayed—and then broke—broke as though a gigantic, unseen hand had reached up and snapped them!

An instant the severed ends ribboned aimlessly, then bent, turned down and darted earthward into the welter of clustered summits at the north and swiftly were gone, while down upon the valley fell night.

"Good God!" whispered Drake. "It was as though something reached up, broke those rays and drew them down—like threads."

"I saw it." I struggled with bewilderment. "I saw it. But I never saw anything like it before," I ended, most inadequately.

"It was PURPOSEFUL," he whispered. "It was DELIBERATE. As though something reached up, juggled with the rays, broke them, and drew them down like willow withes."

"The devils that dwell here!" quavered Chiu-Ming.

"Some magnetic phenomenon." I was half angry at myself for my own touch of panic. "Light can be deflected by passage through a magnetic field. Of course that's it. Certainly."

"I don't know." Drake's tone was doubtful indeed. "It would take a whale of a magnetic field to have done THAT—it's inconceivable." He harked back to his first idea. "It was so—so DAMNED deliberate," he repeated.

"Devils—" muttered the frightened Chinese.

"What's that?" Drake gripped my arm and pointed to the north. A deeper blackness had grown there while we had been talking, a pool of darkness against which the mountain summits stood out, blade-sharp edges faintly luminous.

A gigantic lance of misty green fire darted from the blackness and thrust its point into the heart of the zenith; following it, leaped into the sky a host of the sparkling spears of light, and now the blackness was like an ebon hand, brandishing a thousand javelins of tinseled flame.

"The aurora," I said.

"It ought to be a good one," mused Drake, gaze intent upon it. "Did you notice the big sun spot?"

I shook my head.

"The biggest I ever saw. Noticed it first at dawn this morning. Some little aurora lighter—that spot. I told you—look at that!" he cried.

The green lances had fallen back. The blackness gathered itself together—then from it began to pulse billows of radiance, spangled with infinite darting swarms of flashing corpuscles like uncounted hosts of dancing fireflies.

Higher the waves rolled—phosphorescent green and iridescent violet, weird copperous yellows and metallic saffrons and a shimmer of glittering ash of rose—then wavered, split and formed into gigantic, sparkling, marching curtains of splendor.

A vast circle of light sprang out upon the folds of the flickering, rushing curtains. Misty at first, its edges sharpened until they rested upon the blazing glory of the northern sky like a pale ring of cold flame. And about it the aurora began to churn, to heap itself, to revolve.

Toward the ring from every side raced the majestic folds, drew themselves together, circled, seethed around it like foam of fire about the lip of a cauldron, and poured through the shining circle as though it were the mouth of that fabled cavern where old Aeolus sits blowing forth and breathing back the winds that sweep the earth.

Yes—into the ring's mouth the aurora flew, cascading in a columned stream to earth. Then swiftly, a mist swept over all the heavens, veiled that incredible cataract.

“Magnetism?” muttered Drake. “I guess NOT!”

“It struck about where the Ting-Pa was broken and seemed drawn down like the rays,” I said.

“Purposeful,” Drake said. “And devilish. It hit on all my nerves like a—like a metal claw. Purposeful and deliberate. There was intelligence behind that.”

“Intelligence? Drake—what intelligence could break the rays of the setting sun and suck down the aurora?”

“I don't know,” he answered.

“Devils,” croaked Chiu-Ming. “The devils that defied Buddha—and have grown strong—”

“Like a metal claw!” breathed Drake.

Far to the west a sound came to us; first a whisper, then a wild rushing, a prolonged wailing, a crackling. A great light flashed through the mist, glowed about us and faded. Again the wailing, the vast rushing, the retreating whisper.

Then silence and darkness dropped embraced upon the valley of the blue poppies.

CHAPTER II. THE SIGIL ON THE ROCKS

Dawn came. Drake had slept well. But I, who had not his youthful resiliency, lay for long, awake and uneasy. I had hardly sunk into troubled slumber before dawn awakened me.

As we breakfasted, I approached directly that matter which my growing liking for him was turning into strong desire.

“Drake,” I asked. “Where are you going?”

“With you,” he laughed. “I'm foot loose and fancy free. And I think you ought to have somebody with you to help watch that cook. He might get away.”

The idea seemed to appall him.

“Fine!” I exclaimed heartily, and thrust out my hand to him. “I'm thinking of striking over the range soon to the Manasarowar Lakes. There's a curious flora I'd like to study.”

“Anywhere you say suits me,” he answered.

We clasped hands on our partnership and soon we were on our way to the valley's western gate; our united caravans stringing along behind us. Mile after mile we trudged through the blue poppies, discussing the enigmas of the twilight and of the night.

In the light of day their breath of vague terror was dissipated. There was no place for mystery nor dread under this floor of brilliant sunshine. The smiling sapphire floor rolled ever on before us.

Whispering little playful breezes flew down the slopes to gossip for a moment with the nodding flowers. Flocks of rose finches raced chattering overhead to quarrel with the tiny willow warblers, the chi-u-teb-tok, holding fief of the drooping, graceful bowers bending down to the little laughing stream that for the past hour had chuckled and gurgled like a friendly water baby beside us.

I had proven, almost to my own satisfaction, that what we had beheld had been a creation of the extraordinary atmospheric attributes of these highlands, an atmosphere so unique as to make almost anything of the kind possible. But Drake was not convinced.

“I know,” he said. “Of course I understand all that—superimposed layers of warmer air that might have bent the ray; vortices in the higher levels that might have produced just that effect of the

captured aurora. I admit it's all possible. I'll even admit it's all probable, but damn me, Doc, if I BELIEVE it! I had too clearly the feeling of a CONSCIOUS force, a something that KNEW exactly what it was doing—and had a REASON for it."

It was mid-afternoon.

The spell of the valley upon us, we had gone leisurely. The western mount was close, the mouth of the gorge through which we must pass, now plain before us. It did not seem as though we could reach it before dusk, and Drake and I were reconciled to spending another night in the peaceful vale. Plodding along, deep in thought, I was startled by his exclamation.

He was staring at a point some hundred yards to his right. I followed his gaze.

The towering cliffs were a scant half mile away. At some distant time there had been an enormous fall of rock. This, disintegrating, had formed a gently-curving breast which sloped down to merge with the valley's floor. Willow and witch alder, stunted birch and poplar had found roothold, clothed it, until only their crowding outposts, thrusting forward in a wavering semicircle, held back seemingly by the blue hordes, showed where it melted into the meadows.

In the center of this breast, beginning half way up its slopes and stretching down into the flowered fields was a colossal imprint.

Gray and brown, it stood out against the green and blue of slope and level; a rectangle all of thirty feet wide, two hundred long, the heel faintly curved and from its hither end, like claws, four slender triangles radiating from it like twenty-four points of a ten-rayed star.

Irresistibly was it like a footprint—but what thing was there whose tread could leave such a print as this?

I ran up the slope—Drake already well in advance. I paused at the base of the triangles where, were this thing indeed a footprint, the spreading claws sprang from the flat of it.

The track was fresh. At its upper edges were clipped bushes and split trees, the white wood of the latter showing where they had been sliced as though by the stroke of a scimitar.

I stepped out upon the mark. It was as level as though planed; bent down and stared in utter disbelief of what my own eyes beheld.

For stone and earth had been crushed, compressed, into a smooth, microscopically grained, adamantine complex, and in this matrix poppies still bearing traces of their coloring were imbedded like fossils. A cyclone can and does grip straws and thrust them unbroken through an inch board—but what force was there which could take the delicate petals of a flower and set them like inlay within the surface of a stone?

Into my mind came recollection of the wailings, the crashings in the night, of the weird glow that had flashed about us when the mist arose to hide the chained aurora.

"It was what we heard," I said. "The sounds—it was then that this was made."

"The foot of Shin-je!" Chiu-Ming's voice was tremulous. "The lord of Hell has trodden here!"

I translated for Drake's benefit.

"Has the lord of Hell but one foot?" asked Dick, politely.

"He bestrides the mountains," said Chiu-Ming. "On the far side is his other footprint. Shin-je it was who strode the mountains and set here his foot."

Again I interpreted.

Drake cast a calculating glance up to the cliff top.

"Two thousand feet, about," he mused. "Well, if Shin-je is built in our proportions that makes it about right. The length of this thing would give him just about a two thousand foot leg. Yes—he could just about straddle that hill."

"You're surely not serious?" I asked in consternation.

"What the hell!" he exclaimed, "am I crazy? This is no foot mark. How could it be? Look at the mathematical nicety with which these edges are stamped out—as though by a die—

"That's what it reminds me of—a die. It's as if some impossible power had been used to press it down. Like—like a giant seal of metal in a mountain's hand. A sigil—a seal—"

"But why?" I asked. "What could be the purpose—"

"Better ask where the devil such a force could be gotten together and how it came here," he said. "Look—except for this one place

there isn't a mark anywhere. All the bushes and the trees, all the poppies and the grass are just as they ought to be.

“How did whoever or whatever it was that made this, get here and get away without leaving any trace but this? Damned if I don't think Chiu-Ming's explanation puts less strain upon the credulity than any I could offer.”

I peered about. It was so. Except for the mark, there was no slightest sign of the unusual, the abnormal.

But the mark was enough!

“I'm for pushing up a notch or two and getting into the gorge before dark,” he was voicing my own thought. “I'm willing to face anything human—but I'm not keen to be pressed into a rock like a flower in a maiden's book of poems.” Just at twilight we drew out of the valley into the pass. We traveled a full mile along it before darkness forced us to make camp. The gorge was narrow. The far walls but a hundred feet away; but we had no quarrel with them for their neighborliness, no! Their solidity, their immutability, breathed confidence back into us.

And after we had found a deep niche capable of holding the entire caravan we filed within, ponies and all, I for one perfectly willing thus to spend the night, let the air at dawn be what it would. We dined within on bread and tea, and then, tired to the bone, sought each his place upon the rocky floor. I slept well, waking only once or twice by Chiu-Ming's groanings; his dreams evidently were none of the pleasantest. If there was an aurora I neither knew nor cared. My slumber was dreamless.

CHAPTER III. RUTH VENTNOR

The dawn, streaming into the niche, awakened us. A covey of partridges venturing too close yielded three to our guns. We breakfasted well, and a little later were pushing on down the cleft.

Its descent, though gradual, was continuous, and therefore I was not surprised when soon we began to come upon evidences of semi-tropical vegetation. Giant rhododendrons and tree ferns gave way to occasional clumps of stately kopek and clumps of the hardier bamboos. We added a few snow cocks to our larder—although they were out of their habitat, flying down into the gorge from their peaks and table-lands for some choice tidbit.

All that day we marched on, and when at night we made camp, sleep came to us quickly and overmastering. An hour after dawn we were on our way. A brief stop we made for lunch; pressed forward.

It was close to two when we caught the first sight of the ruins.

The soaring, verdure-clad walls of the canyon had long been steadily marching closer. Above, between their rims the wide ribbon of sky was like a fantastically shored river, shimmering, dazzling; every cove and headland edged with an opalescent glimmering as of shining pearly beaches.

And as though we were sinking in that sky stream's depths its light kept lessening, darkening imperceptibly with luminous shadows of ghostly beryl, drifting veils of pellucid aquamarine, limpid mists of glaucous chrysolite.

Fainter, more crepuscular became the light, yet never losing its crystalline quality. Now the high overhead river was but a brook; became a thread. Abruptly it vanished.

We passed into a tunnel, fern walled, fern roofed, garlanded with tawny orchids, gay with carmine fungus and golden moss. We stepped out into a blaze of sunlight.

Before us lay a wide green bowl held in the hands of the clustered hills; shallow, circular, as though, while plastic still, the thumb of God had run round its rim, shaping it. Around it the peaks crowded, craning their lofty heads to peer within.

It was about a mile in its diameter, this hollow, as my gaze then measured it. It had three openings—one that lay like a crack in the northeast slope; another, the tunnel mouth through which we had come. The third lifted itself out of the bowl, creeping up the precipitous bare scarp of the western barrier straight to the north, clinging to the ochreous rock up and up until it vanished around a far distant shoulder.

It was a wide and bulwarked road, a road that spoke as clearly as though it had tongue of human hands which had cut it there in the mountain's breast. An ancient road weary beyond belief beneath the tread of uncounted years.

From the hollow the blind soul of loneliness groped out to greet us!

Never had I felt such loneliness as that which lapped the lip of the verdant bowl. It was tangible—as though it had been poured from some reservoir of misery. A pool of despair—

Half the width of the valley away the ruins began. Weirdly were they its visible expression. They huddled in two bent rows to the bottom. They crouched in a wide cluster against the cliffs. From the cluster a curving row of them ran along the southern crest of the hollow.

A flight of shattered, cyclopean steps lifted to a ledge and here a crumbling fortress stood.

Irresistibly did the ruins seem a colossal hag, flung prone, lying listlessly, helplessly, against the barrier's base. The huddled lower ranks were the legs, the cluster the body, the upper row an outflung arm and above the neck of the stairway the ancient fortress, rounded and with two huge ragged apertures in its northern front was an aged, bleached and withered head staring, watching.

I looked at Drake—the spell of the bowl was heavy upon him, his face drawn. The Chinaman and Tibetan were murmuring, terror written large upon them.

“A hell of a joint!” Drake turned to me, a shadow of a grin lightening the distress on his face. “But I'd rather chance it than go back. What d'you say?”

I nodded, curiosity mastering my oppression. We stepped over the rim, rifles on the alert. Close behind us crowded the two servants and the ponies.

The vale was shallow, as I have said. We trod the fragments of an olden approach to the green tunnel so the descent was not difficult. Here and there beside the path upreared huge broken blocks. On them I thought I could see faint tracings as of carvings—now a suggestion of gaping, arrow-fanged dragon jaws, now the outline of a scaled body, a hint of enormous, batlike wings.

Now we had reached the first of the crumbling piles that stretched down into the valley's center.

Half fainting, I fell against Drake, clutching to him for support.

A stream of utter hopelessness was racing upon us, swirling and eddying around us, reaching to our hearts with ghostly fingers dripping with despair. From every shattered heap it seemed to pour, rushing down the road upon us like a torrent, engulfing us, submerging, drowning.

Unseen it was—yet tangible as water; it sapped the life from every nerve. Weariness filled me, a desire to drop upon the stones, to be rolled away. To die. I felt Drake's body quivering even as mine; knew that he was drawing upon every reserve of strength.

“Steady,” he muttered. “Steady—”

The Tibetan shrieked and fled, the ponies scrambling after him. Dimly I remembered that mine carried precious specimens; a surge of anger passed, beating back the anguish. I heard a sob from Chiu-Ming, saw him drop.

Drake stopped, drew him to his feet. We placed him between us, thrust each an arm through his own. Then, like swimmers, heads bent, we pushed on, buffeting that inexplicable invisible flood.

As the path rose, its force lessened, my vitality grew, and the terrible desire to yield and be swept away waned. Now we had reached the foot of the cyclopean stairs, now we were half up them—and now as we struggled out upon the ledge on which the watching fortress stood, the clutching stream shoaled swiftly, the shoal became safe, dry land and the cheated, unseen maelstrom swirled harmlessly beneath us.

We stood erect, gasping for breath, again like swimmers who have fought their utmost and barely, so barely, won.

There was an almost imperceptible movement at the side of the ruined portal.

Out darted a girl. A rifle dropped from her hands. Straight she sped toward me.

And as she ran I recognized her.

Ruth Ventnor!

The flying figure reached me, threw soft arms around my neck, was weeping in relieved gladness on my shoulder.

"Ruth!" I cried. "What on earth are YOU doing here?"

"Walter!" she sobbed. "Walter Goodwin—Oh, thank God! Thank God!"

She drew herself from my arms, catching her breath; laughed shakily.

I took swift stock of her. Save for fear upon her, she was the same Ruth I had known three years before; wide, deep blue eyes that were now all seriousness, now sparkling wells of mischief; petite, rounded and tender; the fairest skin; an impudent little nose; shining clusters of intractable curls; all human, sparkling and sweet.

Drake coughed, insinuatingly. I introduced him.

"I—I watched you struggling through that dreadful pit." She shuddered. "I could not see who you were, did not know whether friend or enemy—but oh, my heart almost died in pity for you, Walter," she breathed. "What can it be—THERE?"

I shook my head.

"Martin could not see you," she went on. "He was watching the road that leads above. But I ran down—to help."

"Mart watching?" I asked. "Watching for what?"

"I—" she hesitated oddly. "I think I'd rather tell you before him. It's so strange—so incredible."

She led us through the broken portal and into the fortress. It was more gigantic even than I had thought. The floor of the vast chamber we had entered was strewn with fragments fallen from the crackling, stone-vaulted ceiling. Through the breaks light streamed from the level above us.

We picked our way among the debris to a wide crumbling stairway, crept up it, Ruth flitting ahead. We came out opposite one of the eye-like apertures. Black against it, perched high upon a pile of blocks, I recognized the long, lean outline of Ventnor, rifle in hand, gazing intently up the ancient road whose windings were plain through the opening. He had not heard us.

“Martin,” called Ruth softly.

He turned. A shaft of light from a crevice in the gap's edge struck his face, flashing it out from the semidarkness of the corner in which he crouched. I looked into the quiet gray eyes, upon the keen face.

“Goodwin!” he shouted, tumbling down from his perch, shaking me by the shoulders. “If I had been in the way of praying—you're the man I'd have prayed for. How did you get here?”

“Just wandering, Mart,” I answered. “But Lord! I'm sure GLAD to see you.”

“Which way did you come?” he asked, keenly. I threw my hand toward the south.

“Not through that hollow?” he asked incredulously.

“And some hell of a place to get through,” Drake broke in. “It cost us our ponies and all my ammunition.”

“Richard Drake,” I said. “Son of old Alvin—you knew him, Mart.”

“Knew him well,” cried Ventnor, seizing Dick's hand. “Wanted me to go to Kamchatka to get some confounded sort of stuff for one of his devilish experiments. Is he well?”

“He's dead,” replied Dick soberly.

“Oh!” said Ventnor. “Oh—I'm sorry. He was a great man.”

Briefly I acquainted him with my wanderings, my encounter with Drake.

“That place out there—” he considered us thoughtfully. “Damned if I know what it is. Thought maybe it's gas—of a sort. If it hadn't been for it we'd have been out of this hole two days ago. I'm pretty sure it must be gas. And it must be much less than it was this morning, for then we made an attempt to get through again—and couldn't.”

I was hardly listening. Ventnor had certainly advanced a theory of our unusual symptoms that had not occurred to me. That hollow

might indeed be a pocket into which a gas flowed; just as in the mines the deadly coal damp collects in pits, flows like a stream along the passages. It might be that—some odorless, colorless gas of unknown qualities; and yet—

"Did you try respirators?" asked Dick.

"Surely," said Ventnor. "First off the go. But they weren't of any use. The gas, if it is gas, seems to operate as well through the skin as through the nose and mouth. We just couldn't make it—and that's all there is to it. But if you made it—could we try it now, do you think?" he asked eagerly.

I felt myself go white.

"Not—not for a little while," I stammered.

He nodded, understandingly.

"I see," he said. "Well, we'll wait a bit, then."

"But why are you staying here? Why didn't you make for the road up the mountain? What are you watching for, anyway?" asked Drake.

"Go to it, Ruth," Ventnor grinned. "Tell 'em. After all—it was YOUR party you know."

"Mart!" she cried, blushing.

"Well—it wasn't ME they admired," he laughed.

"Martin!" she cried again, and stamped her foot.

"Shoot," he said. "I'm busy. I've got to watch."

"Well"—Ruth's voice was uncertain—"we'd been hunting up in Kashmir. Martin wanted to come over somewhere here. So we crossed the passes. That was about a month ago. The fourth day out we ran across what looked like a road running south.

"We thought we'd take it. It looked sort of old and lost—but it was going the way we wanted to go. It took us first into a country of little hills; then to the very base of the great range itself; finally into the mountains—and then it ran blank."

"Bing!" interjected Ventnor, looking around for a moment. "Bing—just like that. Slap dash against a prodigious fall of rock. We couldn't get over it."

"So we cast about to find another road," went on Ruth. "All we could strike were—just strikes."

“No fish on the end of 'em,” said Ventnor. “God! But I'm glad to see you, Walter Goodwin. Believe me, I am. However—go on, Ruth.”

“At the end of the second week,” she said, “we knew we were lost. We were deep in the heart of the range. All around us was a forest of enormous, snow-topped peaks. The gorges, the canyons, the valleys that we tried led us east and west, north and south.

“It was a maze, and in it we seemed to be going ever deeper. There was not the SLIGHTEST sign of human life. It was as though no human beings except ourselves had ever been there. Game was plentiful. We had no trouble in getting food. And sooner or later, of course, we were bound to find our way out. We didn't worry.

“It was five nights ago that we camped at the head of a lovely little valley. There was a mound that stood up like a tiny watch-tower, looking down it. The trees grew round like tall sentinels.

“We built our fire in that mound; and after we had eaten, Martin slept. I sat watching the beauty of the skies and of the shadowy vale. I heard no one approach—but something made me leap to my feet, look behind me.

“A man was standing just within the glow of firelight, watching me.”

“A Tibetan?” I asked. She shook her head, trouble in her eyes.

“Not at all.” Ventnor turned his head. “Ruth screamed and awakened me. I caught a glimpse of the fellow before he vanished.

“A short purple mantle hung from his shoulders. His chest was covered with fine chain mail. His legs were swathed and bound by the thongs of his high buskins. He carried a small, round, hide-covered shield and a short two-edged sword. His head was helmeted. He belonged, in fact—oh, at least twenty centuries back.”

He laughed in plain enjoyment of our amazement.

“Go on, Ruth,” he said, and took up his watch.

“But Martin did not see his face,” she went on. “And oh, but I wish I could forget it. It was as white as mine, Walter, and cruel, so cruel; the eyes glowed and they looked upon me like a—like a slave dealer. They shamed me—I wanted to hide myself.

“I cried out and Martin awakened. As he moved, the

man stepped out of the light and was gone. I think he had not seen Martin; had believed that I was alone.

"We put out the fire, moved farther into the shadow of the trees. But I could not sleep—I sat hour after hour, my pistol in my hand," she patted the automatic in her belt, "my rifle close beside me.

"The hours went by—dreadfully. At last I dozed. When I awakened again it was dawn—and—and—" she covered her eyes, then: "TWO men were looking down on me. One was he who had stood in the firelight."

"They were talking," interrupted Ventnor again, "in archaic Persian."

"Persian," I repeated blankly; "archaic Persian?"

"Very much so," he nodded. "I've a fair knowledge of the modern tongue, and a rather unusual command of Arabic. The modern Persian, as you know, comes straight through from the speech of Xerxes, of Cyrus, of Darius whom Alexander of Macedon conquered. It has been changed mainly by taking on a load of Arabic words. Well—there wasn't a trace of the Arabic in the tongue they were speaking.

"It sounded odd, of course—but I could understand quite easily. They were talking about Ruth. To be explicit, they were discussing her with exceeding frankness—"

"Martin!" she cried wrathfully.

"Well, all right," he went on, half repentantly. "As a matter of fact, I had seen the pair steal up. My rifle was under my hand. So I lay there quietly, listening.

"You can realize, Walter, that when I caught sight of those two, looking as though they had materialized from Darius's ghostly hordes, my scientific curiosity was aroused—prodigiously. So in my interest I passed over the matter of their speech; not alone because I thought Ruth asleep but also because I took into consideration that the mode of polite expression changes with the centuries—and these gentlemen clearly belonged at least twenty centuries back—the real truth is I was consumed with curiosity.

“They had got to a point where they were detailing with what pleasure a certain mysterious person whom they seemed to regard with much fear and respect would contemplate her. I was wondering how long my desire to observe—for to the anthropologist they were most fascinating—could hold my hand back from my rifle when Ruth awakened.

“She jumped up like a little fury. Fired a pistol point blank at them. Their amazement was—well—ludicrous. I know it seems incredible, but they seemed to know nothing of firearms—they certainly acted as though they didn't.

“They simply flew into the timber. I took a pistol shot at one but missed. Ruth hadn't though; she had winged her man; he left a red trail behind him.

“We didn't follow the trail. We made for the opposite direction—and as fast as possible.

“Nothing happened that day or night. Next morning, creeping up a slope, we caught sight of a suspicious glitter a mile or two away in the direction we were going. We sought shelter in a small ravine. In a little while, over the hill and half a mile away from us, came about two hundred of these fellows, marching along.

“And they were indeed Darius's men. Men of that Persia which had been dead for millenniums. There was no mistaking them, with their high, covering shields, their great bows, their javelins and armor.

“They passed; we doubled. We built no fires that night—and we ought to have turned the pony loose, but we didn't. It carried my instruments, and ammunition, and I felt we were going to need the latter.

“The next morning we caught sight of another band—or the same. We turned again. We stole through a tree-covered plain; we struck an ancient road. It led south, into the peaks again. We followed it. It brought us here.

“It isn't, as you observe, the most comfortable of places. We struck across the hollow to the crevice—we knew nothing of the entrance you came through. The hollow was not pleasant, either. But it was penetrable, then.

“We crossed. As we were about to enter the cleft there issued out of it a most unusual and disconcerting chorus of sounds—wailings, crashings, splinterings.”

I started, shot a look at Dick; absorbed, he was drinking in Ventnor's every word.

“So unusual, so—well, disconcerting is the best word I can think of, that we were not encouraged to proceed. Also the peculiar unpleasantness of the hollow was increasing rapidly.

“We made the best time we could back to the fortress. And when next we tried to go through the hollow, to search for another outlet—we couldn't. You know why,” he ended abruptly.

“But men in ancient armor. Men like those of Darius.” Dick broke the silence that had followed this amazing recital. “It's incredible!”

“Yes,” agreed Ventnor, “isn't it. But there they were. Of course, I don't maintain that they WERE relics of Darius's armies. They might have been of Xerxes before him—or of Artaxerxes after him. But there they certainly were, Drake, living, breathing replicas of exceedingly ancient Persians.

“Why, they might have been the wall carvings on the tomb of Khosroes come to life. I mention Darius because he fits in with the most plausible hypothesis. When Alexander the Great smashed his empire he did it rather thoroughly. There wasn't much sympathy for the vanquished in those days. And it's entirely conceivable that a city or two in Alexander's way might have gathered up a fleeting regiment or so for protection and have decided not to wait for him, but to hunt for cover.

“Naturally, they would have gone into the almost inaccessible heart of the high ranges. There is nothing impossible in the theory that they found shelter at last up here. As long as history runs this has been a well-nigh unknown land. Penetrating some mountain-guarded, easily defended valley they might have decided to settle down for a time, have rebuilt a city, raised a government; laying low, in a sentence, waiting for the storm to blow over.

“Why did they stay? Well, they might have found the new life more pleasant than the old. And they might have been locked in their valley by some accident—landslides, rockfalls sealing up the entrance. There are a dozen reasonable possibilities.”

“But those who hunted you weren't locked in,” objected Drake.

“No,” Ventnor grinned ruefully. “No, they certainly weren't. Maybe we drifted into their preserves by a way they don't know. Maybe they've found another way out. I'm sure I don't know. But I DO know what I saw.”

“The noises, Martin,” I said, for his description of these had been the description of those we had heard in the blue valley. “Have you heard them since?”

“Yes,” he answered, hesitating oddly.

“And you think those—those soldiers you saw are still hunting for you?”

“Haven't a doubt of it,” he replied more cheerfully. “They didn't look like chaps who would give up a hunt easily—at least not a hunt for such novel, interesting, and therefore desirable and delectable game as we must have appeared to them.”

“Martin,” I said decisively, “where's your pony? We'll try the hollow again, at once. There's Ruth—and we'd never be able to hold back such numbers as you've described.”

“You feel strong enough to try it?”

CHAPTER IV. METAL WITH A BRAIN

The eagerness, the relief in his voice betrayed the tension, the anxiety which until now he had hidden so well; and hot shame burned me for my shrinking, my dread of again passing through that haunted vale.

"I certainly DO." I was once more master of myself. "Drake—don't you agree?"

"Sure," he replied. "Sure. I'll look after Ruth—er—I mean Miss Ventnor."

The glint of amusement in Ventnor's eyes at this faded abruptly; his face grew somber.

"Wait," he said. "I carried away some—some exhibits from the crevice of the noises, Goodwin."

"What kind of exhibits?" I asked, eagerly.

"Put 'em where they'd be safe," he continued. "I've an idea they're far more curious than our armored men—and of far more importance. At any rate, we must take them with us.

"Go with Ruth, you and Drake, and look at them. And bring them back with the pony. Then we'll make a start. A few minutes more probably won't make much difference—but hurry."

He turned back to his watch. Ordering Chiu-Ming to stay with him I followed Ruth and Drake down the ruined stairway. At the bottom she came to me, laid little hands on my shoulders.

"Walter," she breathed, "I'm frightened. I'm so frightened I'm afraid to tell even Mart. He doesn't like them, either, these little things you're going to see. He likes them so little that he's afraid to let me know how little he does like them."

"But what are they? What's to fear about them?" asked Drake.

"See what you think!" She led us slowly, almost reluctantly toward the rear of the fortress. "They lay in a little heap at the mouth of the cleft where we heard the noises. Martin picked them up and dropped them in a sack before we ran through the hollow.

"They're grotesque and they're almost CUTE, and they make me feel as though they were the tiniest tippy-tip of the claw of some

incredibly large cat just stealing around the corner, a terrible cat, a cat as big as a mountain," she ended breathlessly.

We climbed through the crumbling masonry into a central, open court. Here a clear spring bubbled up in a ruined and choked stone basin; close to the ancient well was their pony, contentedly browsing in the thick grass that grew around it. From one of its hampers Ruth took a large cloth bag.

"To carry them," she said, and trembled.

We passed through what had once been a great door into another chamber larger than that we had just left; and it was in better preservation, the ceiling unbroken, the light dim after the blazing sun of the court. Near its center she halted us.

Before me ran a two-feet-wide ragged crack, splitting the floor and dropping down into black depths. Beyond was an expanse of smooth flagging, almost clear of debris.

Drake gave a low whistle. I followed his pointing finger. In the wall at the end whirled two enormous dragon shapes, cut in low relief. Their gigantic wings, their monstrous coils, covered the nearly unbroken surface, and these CHIMERAE were the shapes upon the upthrust blocks of the haunted roadway.

In Ruth's gaze I read a nameless fear, a half shuddering fascination.

But she was not looking at the cavern dragons.

Her gaze was fixed upon what at my first glance seemed to be a raised and patterned circle in the dust-covered floor. Not more than a foot in width, it shone wanly with a pale, metallic bluish luster, as though, I thought, it had been recently polished. Compared with the wall's tremendous winged figures this floor design was trivial, ludicrously insignificant. What could there be about it to stamp that dread upon Ruth's face?

I leaped the crevice; Dick joined me. Now I could see that the ring was not continuous. Its broken circle was made of sharply edged cubes about an inch in height, separated from each other with mathematical exactness by another inch of space. I counted them—there were nineteen.

Almost touching them with their bases were an equal number of pyramids, of tetrahedrons, as sharply angled and of similar length.

They lay on their sides with tips pointing starlike to six spheres clustered like a conventionalized five petaled primrose in the exact center. Five of these spheres—the petals—were, I roughly calculated, about an inch and a half in diameter, the ball they enclosed larger by almost an inch.

So orderly was their arrangement, so much like a geometrical design nicely done by some clever child that I hesitated to disturb it. I bent, and stiffened, the first touch of dread upon me.

For within the ring, close to the clustering globes, was a miniature replica of the giant track in the poppied valley!

It stood out from the dust with the same hint of crushing force, the same die cut sharpness, the same METALLIC suggestion—and pointing toward the globes were the claw marks of the four spreading star points.

I reached down and picked up one of the pyramids. It seemed to cling to the rock; it was with effort that I wrenched it away. It gave to the touch a slight sensation of warmth—how can I describe it?—a warmth that was living.

I weighed it in my hand. It was oddly heavy, twice the weight, I should say, of platinum. I drew out a glass and examined it. Decidedly the pyramid was metallic, but of finest, almost silken texture—and I could not place it among any of the known metals. It certainly was none I had ever seen; yet it was as certainly metal. It was striated—slender filaments radiating from tiny, dully lustrous points within the polished surface.

And suddenly I had the weird feeling that each of these points was an eye, peering up at me, scrutinizing me. There came a startled cry from Dick.

"Look at the ring!"

The ring was in motion!

Faster the cubes moved; faster the circle revolved; the pyramids raised themselves, stood bolt upright on their square bases; the six rolling spheres touched them, joined the spinning, and with sleight-of-hand suddenness the ring drew together; its units coalesced, cubes and pyramids and globes threading with a curious suggestion of ferment.

With the same startling abruptness there stood erect, where but a moment before they had seethed, a little figure, grotesque; a weirdly humorous, a vaguely terrifying foot-high shape, squared and angled and pointed and ANIMATE—as though a child should build from nursery blocks a fantastic shape which abruptly is filled with throbbing life.

A troll from the kindergarten! A kobold of the toys!

Only for a second it stood, then began swiftly to change, melting with quicksilver quickness from one outline into another as square and triangle and spheres changed places. Their shiftings were like the transformations one sees within a kaleidoscope. And in each vanishing form was the suggestion of unfamiliar harmonies, of a subtle, a transcendental geometric art as though each swift shaping were a symbol, a WORD—

Euclid's problems given volition!

Geometry endowed with consciousness!

It ceased. Then the cubes drew one upon the other until they formed a pedestal nine inches high; up this pillar rolled the larger globe, balanced itself upon the top; the five spheres followed it, clustered like a ring just below it. The other cubes raced up, clicked two by two on the outer arc of each of the five balls; at the ends of these twin blocks a pyramid took its place, tipping each with a point.

The Lilliputian fantasy was now a pedestal of cubes surmounted by a ring of globes from which sprang a star of five arms.

The spheres began to revolve. Faster and faster they spun around the base of the crowning globe; the arms became a disc upon which tiny brilliant sparks appeared, clustered, vanished only to reappear in greater number.

The troll swept toward me. It GLIDED. The finger of panic touched me. I sprang aside, and swift as light it followed, seemed to poise itself to leap.

“Drop it!” It was Ruth's cry.

But, before I could let fall the pyramid I had forgotten was in my hand, the little figure touched me and a paralyzing shock ran through me. My fingers clenched, locked. I stood, muscle and nerve bound, unable to move.

The little figure paused. Its whirling disc shifted from the horizontal plane on which it spun. It was as though it cocked its head to look up at me—and again I had the sense of innumerable eyes peering at me. It did not seem menacing—its attitude was inquisitive, waiting; almost as though it had asked for something and wondered why I did not let it have it. The shock still held me rigid, although a tingle in every nerve told me of returning force.

The disc tilted back to place, bent toward me again. I heard a shout; heard a bullet strike the pigmy that now clearly menaced; heard the bullet ricochet without the slightest effect upon it. Dick leaped beside me, raised a foot and kicked at the thing. There was a flash of light and upon the instant he crashed down as though struck by a giant hand, lay sprawling and inert upon the floor.

There was a scream from Ruth; there was softly sibilant rustling all about her. I saw her leap the crevice, drop on her knees beside Drake.

There was movement on the flagging where she stood. A score or more of faintly shining, bluish shapes were marching there—pyramids and cubes and spheres like those forming the shape that stood before me. There was a curious sharp tang of ozone in the air, a perceptible tightening as of electrical tension.

They swept to the edge of the fissure, swam together, and there, hanging half over the gap was a bridge, half spanning it, a weird and fairy arch made up of alternate cube and angle. The shape at my feet disintegrated; resolved itself into units that raced over to the beckoning span.

At the hither side of the crack they clicked into place, even as had the others. Before me now was a bridge complete except for the one arc near the middle where an angled gap marred it.

I felt the little object I held pulse within my hand, striving to escape. I dropped it. The tiny shape swept to the bridge, ascended it—dropped into the gap.

The arch was complete—hanging in one flying span over the depths!

Upon it, over it, as though they had but awaited this completion, rolled the six globes. And as they dropped to the farther side the end of the bridge nearest me raised itself in air, curved itself like a

scorpion's tail, drew itself into a closer circled arc, and dropped upon the floor beyond.

Again the sibilant rustling—and cubes and pyramids and spheres were gone.

Nerves tingling slowly back to life, mazed in absolute bewilderment, my gaze sought Drake. He was sitting up, feebly, his head supported by Ruth's hands.

“Goodwin!” he whispered. “What—what were they?”

“Metal,” I said—it was the only word to which my whirling mind could cling—“metal—”

“Metal!” he echoed. “These things metal? Metal—ALIVE AND THINKING!”

Suddenly he was silent, his face a page on which, visibly, dread gathered slowly and ever deeper.

And as I looked at Ruth, white-faced, and at him, I knew that my own was as pallid, as terror-stricken as theirs.

“They were such LITTLE THINGS,” muttered Drake. “Such little things—bits of metal—little globes and pyramids and cubes—just little THINGS.”

“Babes! Only babes!” It was Ruth—“BABES!”

“Bits of metal”—Dick's gaze sought mine, held it—“and they looked for each other, they worked with each other—THINKINGLY, CONSCIOUSLY—they were deliberate, purposeful—little things—and with the force of a score of dynamos—living, THINKING—”

“Don't!” Ruth laid white hands over his eyes. “Don't—don't YOU be frightened!”

“Frightened?” he echoed. “I'M not afraid—yes, I AM afraid—”

He arose, stiffly—and stumbled toward me.

Afraid? Drake afraid. Well—so was I. Bitterly, TERRIBLY afraid.

For what we had beheld in the dusk of that dragoned, ruined chamber was outside all experience, beyond all knowledge or dream of science. Not their shapes—that was nothing. Not even that, being metal, they had moved.

But that being metal, they had moved consciously, thoughtfully, deliberately.

They were metal things with—MINDS!

That—that was the incredible, the terrifying thing. That—and their power.

Thor compressed within Hop-o'-my-thumb—and thinking. The lightnings incarnate in metal minacules—and thinking.

The inert, the immobile, given volition, movement, cognoscence—thinking.

Metal with a brain!

CHAPTER V. THE SMITING THING

Silently we looked at each other, and silently we passed out of the courtyard. The dread was heavy upon me. The twilight was stealing upon the close-clustered peaks. Another hour, and their amethyst-and-purple mantles would drop upon them; snowfields and glaciers sparkle out in irised beauty; nightfall.

As I gazed upon them I wondered to what secret place within their brooding immensities the little metal mysteries had fled. And to what myriads, it might be, of their kind? And these hidden hordes—of what shapes were they? Of what powers? Small like these, or—or—

Quick on the screen of my mind flashed two pictures, side by side—the little four-rayed print in the great dust of the crumbling ruin and its colossal twin on the breast of the poppied valley.

I turned aside, crept through the shattered portal and looked over the haunted hollow.

Unbelieving, I rubbed my eyes; then leaped to the very brim of the bowl.

A lark had risen from the roof of one of the shattered heaps and had flown caroling up into the shadowy sky.

A flock of the little willow warblers flung themselves across the valley, scolding and gossiping; a hare sat upright in the middle of the ancient roadway.

The valley itself lay serenely under the ambering light, smiling, peaceful—emptied of horror!

I dropped over the side, walked cautiously down the road up which but an hour or so before we had struggled so desperately; paced farther and farther with an increasing confidence and a growing wonder.

Gone was that soul of loneliness; vanished the whirlpool of despair that had striven to drag us down to death.

The bowl was nothing but a quiet, smiling lovely little hollow in the hills. I looked back. Even the ruins had lost their sinister shape; were time-worn, crumbling piles—nothing more.

I saw Ruth and Drake run out upon the ledge and beckon me; made my way back to them, running.

“It's all right,” I shouted. “The place is all right.”

I stumbled up the side; joined them.

“It's empty,” I cried. “Get Martin and Chiu-Ming quick! While the way's open—”

A rifle-shot rang out above us; another and another. From the portal scampered Chiu-Ming, his robe tucked up about his knees.

“They come!” he gasped. “They come!”

There was a flashing of spears high up the winding mountain path. Down it was pouring an avalanche of men. I caught the glint of helmets and corselets. Those in the van were mounted, galloping two abreast upon sure-footed mountain ponies. Their short swords, lifted high, flickered.

After the horsemen swarmed foot soldiers, a forest of shining points and dully gleaming pikes above them. Clearly to us came their battlecries.

Again Ventnor's rifle cracked. One of the foremost riders went down; another stumbled over him, fell. The rush was checked for an instant, milling upon the road.

“Dick,” I cried, “rush Ruth over to the tunnel mouth. We'll follow. We can hold them there. I'll get Martin. Chiu-Ming, after the pony, quick.”

I pushed the two over the rim of the hollow. Side by side the Chinaman and I ran back through the gateway. I pointed to the animal and rushed back into the fortress.

“Quick, Mart!” I shouted up the shattered stairway. “We can get through the hollow. Ruth and Drake are on their way to the break we came through. Hurry!”

“All right. Just a minute,” he called.

I heard him empty his magazine with almost machine-gun quickness. There was a short pause, and down the broken steps he leaped, gray eyes blazing.

“The pony?” He ran beside me toward the portal. “All my ammunition is on him.”

“Chiu-Ming's taking care of that,” I gasped.

We darted out of the gateway. A good five hundred yards away were Ruth and Drake, running straight to the green tunnel's mouth. Between them and us was Chiu-Ming urging on the pony.

As we sped after him I looked back. The horsemen had recovered, were now a scant half-mile from where the road swept past the fortress. I saw that with their swords the horsemen bore great bows. A little cloud of arrows sparkled from them; fell far short.

"Don't look back," grunted Ventnor. "Stretch yourself, Walter. There's a surprise coming. Hope to God I judged the time right."

We turned off the ruined way; raced over the sward.

"If it looks as though—we can't make it," he panted, "YOU beat it after the rest. I'll try to hold 'em until you get into the tunnel. Never do for 'em to get Ruth."

"Right." My own breathing was growing labored, "WE'LL hold them. Drake can take care of Ruth."

"Good boy," he said. "I wouldn't have asked you. It probably means death."

"Very well," I gasped, irritated. "But why borrow trouble?"

He reached out, touched me.

"You're right, Walter," he grinned. "It does—seem—like carrying coals—to Newcastle."

There was a thunderous booming behind us; a shattering crash. A cloud of smoke and dust hung over the northern end of the ruined fortress.

It lifted swiftly, and I saw that the whole side of the structure had fallen, littering the road with its fragments. Scattered prone among these were men and horses; others staggered, screaming. On the farther side of this stony dike our pursuers were held like rushing waters behind a sudden fallen tree.

"Timed to a second!" cried Ventnor. "Hold 'em for a while. Fuses and dynamite. Blew out the whole side, right on 'em, by the Lord!"

On we fled. Chiu-Ming was now well in advance; Ruth and Dick less than half a mile from the opening of the green tunnel. I saw Drake stop, raise his rifle, empty it before him, and, holding Ruth by the hand, race back toward us.

Even as he turned, the vine-screened entrance through which we had come, through which we had thought lay safety, streamed other armored men. We were outflanked.

“To the fissure!” shouted Ventnor. Drake heard, for he changed his course to the crevice at whose mouth Ruth had said the—Little Things—had lain.

After him streaked Chiu-Ming, urging on the pony. Shouting out of the tunnel, down over the lip of the bowl, leaped the soldiers. We dropped upon our knees, sent shot after shot into them. They fell back, hesitated. We sprang up, sped on.

All too short was the check, but once more we held them—and again.

Now Ruth and Dick were a scant fifty yards from the crevice. I saw him stop, push her from him toward it. She shook her head.

Now Chiu-Ming was with them. Ruth sprang to the pony, lifted from its back a rifle. Then into the mass of their pursuers Drake and she poured a fusillade. They huddled, wavered, broke for cover.

“A chance!” gasped Ventnor.

Behind us was a wolflike yelping. The first pack had re-formed; had crossed the barricade the dynamite had made; was rushing upon us.

I ran as I had never known I could. Over us whined the bullets from the covering guns. Close were we now to the mouth of the fissure. If we could but reach it. Close, close were our pursuers, too—the arrows closer.

“No use!” said Ventnor. “We can't make it. Meet 'em from the front. Drop—and shoot.”

We threw ourselves down, facing them. There came a triumphant shouting. And in that strange sharpening of the senses that always goes hand in hand with deadly peril, that is indeed nature's summoning of every reserve to meet that peril, my eyes took them in with photographic nicety—the linked mail, lacquered blue and scarlet, of the horsemen; brown, padded armor of the footmen; their bows and javelins and short bronze swords, their pikes and shields; and under their round helmets their cruel, bearded faces—white as our own where the black beards did not cover them; their fierce and mocking eyes.

The springs of ancient Persia's long dead power, these. Men of Xerxes's ruthless, world-conquering hordes; the lustful, ravening wolves of Darius whom Alexander scattered—in this world of ours twenty centuries beyond their time!

Swiftly, accurately, even as I scanned them, we had been drilling into them. They advanced deliberately, heedless of their fallen. Their arrows had ceased to fly. I wondered why, for now we were well within their range. Had they orders to take us alive—at whatever cost to themselves?

"I've got only about ten cartridges left, Martin," I told him.

"We've saved Ruth anyway," he said. "Drake ought to be able to hold that hole in the wall. He's got lots of ammunition on the pony. But they've got us."

Another wild shouting; down swept the pack.

We leaped to our feet, sent our last bullets into them; stood ready, rifles clubbed to meet the rush. I heard Ruth scream—

What was the matter with the armored men? Why had they halted? What was it at which they were glaring over our heads? And why had the rifle fire of Ruth and Drake ceased so abruptly?

Simultaneously we turned.

Within the black background of the fissure stood a shape, an apparition, a woman—beautiful, awesome, incredible!

She was tall, standing there swathed from chin to feet in clinging veils of pale amber, she seemed taller even than tall Drake. Yet it was not her height that sent through me the thrill of awe, of half incredulous terror which, relaxing my grip, let my smoking rifle drop to earth; nor was it that about her proud head a cloud of shining tresses swirled and pennoned like a misty banner of woven copper flames—no, nor that through her veils her body gleamed faint radiance.

It was her eyes—her great, wide eyes whose clear depths were like pools of living star fires. They shone from her white face—not phosphorescent, not merely lucent and light reflecting, but as though they themselves were SOURCES of the cold white flames of far stars—and as calm as those stars themselves.

And in that face, although as yet I could distinguish nothing but the eyes, I sensed something unearthly.

“God!” whispered Ventnor. “What IS she?”

The woman stepped from the crevice. Not fifty feet from her were Ruth and Drake and Chiu-Ming, their rigid attitudes revealing the same shock of awe that had momentarily paralyzed me.

She looked at them, beckoned them. I saw the two walk toward her, Chiu-Ming hang back. The great eyes fell upon Ventnor and myself. She raised a hand, motioned us to approach.

I turned. There stood the host that had poured down the mountain road, horsemen, spearsmen, pikemen—a full thousand of them. At my right were the scattered company that had come from the tunnel entrance, threescore or more.

There seemed a spell upon them. They stood in silence, like automatons, only their fiercely staring eyes showing that they were alive.

“Quick,” breathed Ventnor.

We ran toward her who had checked death even while its jaws were closing upon us.

Before we had gone half-way, as though our flight had broken whatever bonds had bound them, a clamor arose from the host; a wild shouting, a clanging of swords on shields. I shot a glance behind. They were in motion, advancing slowly, hesitatingly as yet—but I knew that soon that hesitation would pass; that they would sweep down upon us, engulf us.

“To the crevice,” I shouted to Drake. He paid no heed to me, nor did Ruth—their gaze fastened upon the swathed woman.

Ventnor's hand shot out, gripped my shoulder, halted me. She had thrown up her head. The cloudy METALLIC hair billowed as though wind had blown it.

From the lifted throat came a low, a vibrant cry; harmonious, weirdly disquieting, golden and sweet—and laden with the eery, minor wailings of the blue valley's night, the dragoned chamber.

Before the cry had ceased there poured with incredible swiftness out of the crevice score upon score of the metal things. The fissures vomited them!

Globes and cubes and pyramids—not small like those of the ruins, but shapes all of four feet high, dully lustrous, and deep within that luster the myriads of tiny points of light like unwinking, staring eyes.

They swirled, eddied and formed a barricade between us and the armored men.

Down upon them poured a shower of arrows from the soldiers. I heard the shouts of their captains; they rushed. They had courage—those men—yes!

Again came the woman's cry—golden, peremptory.

Sphere and block and pyramid ran together, seemed to seethe. I had again that sense of a quicksilver melting. Up from them thrust a thick rectangular column. Eight feet in width and twenty feet high, it shaped itself. Out from its left side, from right side, sprang arms—fearful arms that grew and grew as globe and cube and angle raced up the column's side and clicked into place each upon, each after, the other. With magical quickness the arms lengthened.

Before us stood a monstrous shape; a geometric prodigy. A shining angled pillar that, though rigid, immobile, seemed to crouch, be instinct with living force striving to be unleashed.

Two great globes surmounted it—like the heads of some two-faced Janus of an alien world.

At the left and right the knobbed arms, now fully fifty feet in length, writhed, twisted, straightened; flexing themselves in grotesque imitation of a boxer. And at the end of each of the six arms the spheres were clustered thick, studded with the pyramids—again in gigantic, awful, parody of the spiked gloves of those ancient gladiators who fought for imperial Nero.

For an instant it stood here, preening, testing itself like an athlete—a chimera, amorphous yet weirdly symmetric—under the darkening sky, in the green of the hollow, the armored hosts frozen before it—

And then—it struck!

Out flashed two of the arms, with a glancing motion, with appalling force. They sliced into the close-packed forward ranks of the armored men; cut out of them two great gaps.

Sickened, I saw fragments of man and horse fly. Another arm javelined from its place like a flying snake, clicked at the end of another, became a hundred-foot chain which swirled like a flail through the huddling mass. Down upon a knot of the soldiers with a

straight-forward blow drove a third arm, driving through them like a giant punch.

All that host which had driven us from the ruins threw down sword, spear, and pike; fled shrieking. The horsemen spurred their mounts, riding heedless over the footmen who fled with them.

The Smiting Thing seemed to watch them go with—AMUSEMENT!

Before they could cover a hundred yards it had disintegrated. I heard the little wailing sounds—then behind the fleeing men, close behind them, rose the angled pillar; into place sprang the flexing arms, and again it took its toll of them.

They scattered, running singly, by twos, in little groups, for the sides of the valley. They were like rats scampering in panic over the bottom of a great green bowl. And like a monstrous cat the shape played with them—yes, PLAYED.

It melted once more—took new form. Where had been pillar and flailing arms was now a tripod thirty feet high, its legs alternate globe and cube and upon its apex a wide and spinning ring of sparkling spheres. Out from the middle of this ring stretched a tentacle—writhing, undulating like a serpent of steel, four score yards at least in length.

At its end cube, globe and pyramid had mingled to form a huge trident. With the three long prongs of this trident the thing struck, swiftly, with fearful precision—JOYOUSLY—tining those who fled, forking them, tossing them from its points high in air.

It was, I think, that last touch of sheer horror, the playfulness of the Smiting Thing, that sent my dry tongue to the roof of my terror-parched mouth, and held open with monstrous fascination eyes that struggled to close.

Ever the armored men fled from it, and ever was it swifter than they, teetering at their heels on its tripod legs.

From half its length the darting snake streamed red rain.

I heard a sigh from Ruth; wrested my gaze from the hollow; turned. She lay fainting in Drake's arms.

Beside the two the swathed woman stood, looking out upon that slaughter, calm and still, shrouded with an unearthly tranquillity—viewing it, it came to me, with eyes impersonal, cold,

indifferent as the untroubled stars which look down upon hurricane and earthquake in this world of ours.

There was a rushing of many feet at our left; a wail from Chiu-Ming. Were they maddened by fear, driven by despair, determined to slay before they themselves were slain? I do not know. But those who still lived of the men from the tunnel mouth were charging us.

They clustered close, their shields held before them. They had no bows, these men. They moved swiftly down upon us in silence—swords and pikes gleaming.

The Smiting Thing rocked toward us, the metal tentacle straining out like a rigid, racing serpent, flying to cut between its weird mistress and those who menaced her.

I heard Chiu-Ming scream; saw him throw up his hands, cover his eyes—run straight upon the pikes!

"Chiu-Ming!" I shouted. "Chiu-Ming! This way!"

I ran toward him. Before I had gone five paces Ventnor flashed by me, revolver spitting. I saw a spear thrown. It struck the Chinaman squarely in the breast. He tottered—fell upon his knees.

Even as he dropped, the giant flail swept down upon the soldiers. It swept through them like a scythe through ripe grain. It threw them, broken and torn, far toward the valley's sloping sides. It left only fragments that bore no semblance to men.

Ventnor was at Chiu-Ming's head; I dropped beside him. There was a crimson froth upon his lips.

"I thought that Shin-Je was about to slay us," he whispered. "Fear blinded me."

His head dropped; his body quivered, lay still.

We arose, looked about us dazedly. At the side of the crevice stood the woman, her gaze resting upon Drake, his arms about Ruth, her head hidden on his breast.

The valley was empty—save for the huddled heaps that dotted it.

High up on the mountain path a score of figures crept, all that were left of those who but a little before had streamed down to take us captive or to slay. High up in the darkening heavens the

lammergeiers, the winged scavengers of the Himalayas, were gathering.

The woman lifted her hand, beckoned us once more. Slowly we walked toward her, stood before her. The great clear eyes searched us—but no more intently than our own wondering eyes did her.

CHAPTER VI. NORHALA OF THE LIGHTNINGS

We looked upon a vision of loveliness such, I think, as none has beheld since Trojan Helen was a maid. At first all I could note were the eyes, clear as rain-washed April skies, crystal clear as some secret spring sacred to crescented Diana. Their wide gray irises were flecked with golden amber and sapphire—flecks that shone like clusters of little aureate and azure stars.

Then with a strange thrill of wonder I saw that these tiny constellations were not in the irises alone; that they clustered even within the pupils—deep within them, like far-flung stars in the depths of velvety, midnight heavens.

Whence had come those cold fires that had flared from them, I wondered—more menacing, far more menacing, in their cold tranquillity than the hot flames of wrath? These eyes were not perilous—no. Calm they were and still—yet in them a shadow of interest flickered; a ghost of friendliness smiled.

Above them were level, delicately penciled brows of bronze. The lips were coral crimson and—asleep. Sweet were those lips as ever master painter, dreaming his dream of the very soul of woman's sweetness, saw in vision and limned upon his canvas—and asleep, nor wistful for awakening.

A proud, straight nose; a broad low brow, and over it the masses of the tendriling tresses—tawny, lustrous topaz, cloudy, METALLIC. Like spun silk of ruddy copper; and misty as the wisps of cloud that Soul'tze, Goddess of Sleep, sets in the skies of dawn to catch the wandering dreams of lovers.

Down from the wondrous face melted the rounded column of her throat to merge into exquisite curves of shoulders and breasts, half revealed beneath the swathing veils.

But upon that face, within her eyes, kissing her red lips and clothing her breasts, was something unearthly.

Something that came straight out of the still mysteries of the star-filled spaces; out of the ordered, the untroubled, the illimitable void.

A passionless spirit that watched over the human passion in the scarlet mouth, in every slumbering, sculptured line of her—guarding her against its awakening.

Twilight calm dropping down from the sun sleep to still the restless mountain tarn. Ishtar dreamlessly asleep within Nirvana.

Something not of this world we know—and yet of it as the winds of the Cosmos are to the summer breeze, the ocean to the wave, the lightnings to the glowworm.

"She isn't—human," I heard Ventnor whispering at my ear. "Look at her eyes; look at the skin of her—"

Her skin was white as milk of pearls; gossamer fine, silken and creamy; translucent as though a soft brilliancy dwelt within it. Beside it Ruth's fair skin was like some sun-and-wind-roughened country lass's to Titania's.

She studied us as though she were seeing for the first time beings of her own kind. She spoke—and her voice was elfin distant, chimingly sweet like hidden little golden bells; filled with that tranquil, far off spirit that was part of her—as though indeed a tiny golden chime should ring out from the silences, speak for them, find tongues for them. The words were hesitating, halting as though the lips that uttered them found speech strange—as strange as the clear eyes found our images.

And the words were Persian—purest, most ancient Persian.

"I am Norhala," the golden voice chimed forth, whispered down into silence. "I am Norhala."

She shook her head impatiently. A hand stole forth from beneath her veils, slender, long-fingered with nails like rosy pearls; above the wrist was coiled a golden dragon with wicked little crimson eyes. The slender white hand touched Ruth's head, turned it until the strange, flecked orbs looked directly into the misty ones of blue.

Long they gazed—and deep. Then she who had named herself Norhala thrust out a finger, touched the tear that hung upon Ruth's curled lashes, regarded it wonderingly.

Something of recognition, of memory, seemed to awaken within her.

"You are—troubled?" she asked with that halting effort.

Ruth shook her head.

"THEY—do not trouble you?"

She pointed to the huddled heaps strewing the hollow. And then I saw whence the light which had streamed from her great eyes came. For the little azure and golden stars paled, trembled, then flashed out like galaxies of tiny, clustered silver suns.

From that weird radiance Ruth shrank, affrighted.

"No—no," she gasped. "I weep for—HIM."

She pointed where Chiu-Ming lay, a brown blotch at the edge of the shattered men.

"For—him?" There was puzzlement in the faint voice. "For—that? But why?"

She looked at Chiu-Ming—and I knew that to her the sight of the crumpled form carried no recognition of the human, nothing of kin to her. There was a faint wonder in her eyes, no longer light-filled, when at last she turned back to us. Long she considered us.

"Now," she broke the silence, "now something stirs within me that it seems has long been sleeping. It bids me take you with me. Come!"

Abruptly she turned from us, glided to the crevice. We looked at each other, seeking council, decision.

"Chiu-Ming," Drake spoke. "We can't leave him like that. At least let's cover him from the vultures."

"Come." The woman had reached the mouth of the fissure.

"I'm afraid! Oh, Martin—I'm afraid." Ruth reached little trembling hands to her tall brother.

"Come!" Norhala called again. There was an echo of harshness, a clanging, peremptory and inexorable, in the chiming.

Ventnor shrugged his shoulders.

"Come, then," he said.

With one last look at the Chinese, the lammergeiers already circling about him, we walked to the crevice. Norhala waited, silent, brooding until we passed her; then glided behind us.

Before we had gone ten paces I saw that the place was no fissure. It was a tunnel, a passage hewn by human hands, its walls covered with the writhing dragon lines, its roof the mountain.

The swathed woman swept by us. Swiftly we followed her. Far, far ahead was a wan gleaming. It quivered, a faintly shimmering, ghostly curtain, a full mile away.

Now it was close; we passed through it and were out of the tunnel. Before us stretched a narrow gorge, a sword slash in the body of the towering giant under whose feet the tunnel crept. High above was the ribbon of the sky.

The sides were dark, but it came to me that here were no trees, no verdure of any kind. Its floor was strewn with boulders, fantastically shaped, almost indistinguishable in the fast closing dark.

Twin monoliths bulwarked the passage end; the gigantic stones were leaning, crumbling. Fissures radiated from the opening, like deep wrinkles in the rock, showing where earth warping, range pressure, had long been working to close this hewn way.

“Stop,” Norhala's abrupt, golden note halted us; and again through the clear eyes I saw the white starshine flash.

“It may be well—” She spoke as though to herself. “It may be well to close this way. It is not needed—”

Her voice rang out again, vibrant, strangely disquieting, harmonious. Murmurous chanting it was at first, rhythmic and low; ripples and flutings, tones and progressions utterly unknown to me; unfamiliar, abrupt, and alien themes that kept returning, droppings of crystal-clear jewels of sound, golden tollings—and all ordered, mathematical, GEOMETRIC, even as had been the gestures of the shapes; Lilliputians of the ruins, Brobdignagian of the haunted hollow.

What was it? I had it—IT WAS THOSE GESTURES TRANSFORMED INTO SOUND!

There was a movement down by the tunnel mouth. It grew more rapid, seemed to vibrate with her song. Within the darkness there were little flashes; glimmerings of light began to come and go—like little awakenings of eyes of soft, jeweled flames, like giant gorgeous fireflies; flashes of cloudy amber, gleam of rose, sparkles of diamonds and of opals, of emeralds and of rubies—blinking, gleaming.

A shimmering mist drew down around them—a swift and swirling mist. It thickened, was shot with slender shuttled threads like cobweb, coruscating strands of light.

The shining threads grew thicker, pulsed, were spangled with tiny vivid sparklings. They ran together, condensed—and all this in an instant, in a tenth of the time it takes me to write it.

From fiery mist and gemmed flashes came bolt upon bolt of lightning. The cliff face leaped out, a cataract of green flame. The fissures widened, the monoliths trembled, fell.

In the wake of that dazzling brilliancy came utter blackness. I opened my blinded eyes; slowly the flecks of green fire cleared. A faint lambency still clung to the cliff. By it I saw that the tunnel's mouth had vanished, had been sealed—where it had gaped were only tons of shattered rock.

Came a rushing past us as of great bodies; something grazed my hand, something whose touch was like that of warm metal—but metal throbbing with life. They rushed by—and whispered down into silence.

"Come!" Norhala flitted ahead of us, a faintly luminous shape in the darkness. Swiftly we followed. I found Ruth beside me; felt her hand grip my wrist.

"Walter," she whispered, "Walter—she isn't human!"

"Nonsense," I muttered. "Nonsense, Ruth. What do you think she is—a goddess, a spirit of the Himalayas? She's as human as you or I."

"No." Even in the darkness I could sense the stubborn shake of her curly head. "Not all human. Or how could she have commanded those things? Or have summoned the lightnings that blasted the tunnel's mouth? And her skin and hair—they're too WONDERFUL, Walter.

"Why, she makes me look—look coarse. And the light that hovers about her—why, it is by that light we are making our way. And when she touched me—I—I glowed—all through.

"Human, yes—but there is something else in her—something stronger than humanness, something that—makes it sleep!" she added astonishingly.

The ground was level as a dancing floor. We followed the enigmatic glow—emanation, it seemed to me—from Norhala which

was as a light for us to follow within the darkness. The high ribbon of sky had vanished—seemed to be overcast, for I could see no stars.

Within the darkness I began again to sense faint movement; soft stirring all about us. I had the feeling that on each side and behind us moved an invisible host.

"There's something moving all about us—going with us," Ruth echoed my thought.

"It's the wind," I said, and paused—for there was no wind.

From the blackness before us came a succession of curious, muffled clickings, like a smothered mitrailleuse. The luminescence that clothed Norhala brightened, deepening the darkness.

"Cross!"

She pointed into the void ahead; then, as we started forward, thrust out a hand to Ruth, held her back. Drake and Ventnor drew close to them, questioningly, anxious. But I stepped forward, out of the dim gleaming.

Before me were two cubes; one I judged in that uncertain light to be six feet high, the other half its bulk. From them a shaft of pale-blue phosphorescence pierced the murk. They stood, the smaller pressed against the side of the larger, for all the world like a pair of immense nursery blocks, placed like steps by some giant child.

As my eyes swept over them, I saw that the shining shaft was an unbroken span of cubes; not multi-arched like the Lilliputian bridge of the dragon chamber, but flat and running out over an abyss that gaped at my very feet. All of a hundred feet they stretched; a slender, lustrous girder crossing unguessed depths of gloom. From far, far below came the faint whisper of rushing waters.

I faltered. For these were the blocks that had formed the body of the monster of the hollow, its flailing arms. The thing that had played so murderously with the armored men.

And now had shaped itself into this anchored, quiescent bridge.

"Do not fear." It was the woman speaking, softly, as one would reassure a child. "Ascend. Cross. They obey me."

I stepped firmly upon the first block, climbed to the second. The span stretched, sharp edged, smooth, only a slender, shimmering line revealing where each great cube held fast to the other.

I walked at first slowly, then with ever-increasing confidence, for up from the surface streamed a guiding, a holding force, that was like a host of little invisible hands, steadying me, keeping firm my feet. I looked down; the myriads of enigmatic eyes were staring, staring up at me from deep within. They fascinated me; I felt my pace slowing; a vertigo seized me. Resolutely I dragged my gaze up and ahead; marched on.

From the depths came more clearly the sound of the waters. Now there were but a few feet more of the bridge before me. I reached its end, dropped my feet over, felt them touch a smaller cube, and descended.

Over the span came Ventnor. He was leading his laden pony. He had bandaged its eyes so that it could not look upon the narrow way it was treading. And close behind, a hand resting reassuringly upon its flank, strode Drake, swinging along carelessly. The little beast ambled along serenely, sure-footed as all its mountain kind, and docile to darkness and guidance.

Then, an arm about Ruth, floated Norhala. Now she was beside us; dropped her arm from Ruth; glided past us. On for a hundred yards or more we went, and then she drew us a little toward the unseen canyon wall.

She stood before us, shielding us. One golden call she sent.

I looked back into the darkness. Something like an enormous, dimly shimmering rod was raising itself. Higher it rose and higher. Now it stood, upright, a slender towering pillar, a gigantic slim figure whose tip pointed a full hundred feet in the air.

Then slowly it inclined itself toward us; drew closer, closer to the ground; touched and lay there for an instant inert. Abruptly it vanished.

But well I knew what I had seen. The span over which we had passed had raised itself even as had the baby bridge of the fortress; had lifted itself across the chasm and dropping itself upon the hither verge had disintegrated into its units; was following us.

A bridge of metal that could build itself—and break itself. A thinking, conscious metal bridge! A metal bridge with volition—with mind—that was following us.

There sighed from behind a soft, sustained wailing; rapidly it neared us. A wanly glimmering shape drew by; halted. It was like a rigid serpent cut from a gigantic square bar of cold blue steel.

Its head was a pyramid, a tetrahedron; its length vanished in the further darkness. The head raised itself, the blocks that formed its neck separating into open wedges like a Brobdignagian replica of those jointed, fantastic, little painted reptiles the Japanese toy-makers cut from wood.

It seemed to regard us—mockingly. The pointed head dropped—past us streamed the body. Upon it other pyramids clustered—like the spikes that guarded the back of the nightmare Brontosaurus. Its end came swiftly into sight—its tail another pyramid twin to its head.

It FLIRTED by—gaily; vanished.

I had thought the span must disintegrate to follow—and it did not need to! It could move as a COMPOSITE as well as in UNITS. Move intelligently, consciously—as the Smiting Thing had moved.

“Come!” Norhala's command checked my thoughts; we fell in behind her. Looking up I caught the friendly sparkle of a star; knew the cleft was widening.

The star points grew thicker. We stepped out into a valley small as that hollow from which we had fled; ringed like it with heaven-touching summits. I could see clearly. The place was suffused with a soft radiance as though into it the far, bright stars were pouring all their rays, filling it as a cup with their pale flames.

It was luminous as the Alaskan valleys when on white arctic nights they are lighted, the Athabascans believe, by the gleaming spears of hunting gods. The walls of the valley seemed to be drawn back into infinite distances.

The shimmering mists that had nimbused Norhala had vanished—or merging into the wan gleaming had become one with it.

I stared straight at her, striving to clarify in my own clouded thought what it was that I had sensed as inhuman—never of OUR world or its peoples. Yet this conviction came not because of the light that had hovered about her, nor of her summonings of the

lightnings; nor even of her control of those—things—which had smitten the armored men and spanned for us the abyss.

All of that I was certain lay in the domain of the explicable, could be resolved into normality once the basic facts were gained.

Suddenly, I knew. Side by side with what we term the human there dwelt within this woman an actual consciousness foreign to earth, passionless, at least as we know passion, ordered, mathematical—an emanation of the eternal law which guides the circling stars.

This it was that had moved in the gestures which had evoked the lightnings. This it was that had spoken in the song which were those gestures transformed into sound. This it was that something greater than my consciousness knew and accepted.

Something which shared, no—that reigned, serene and untroubled, upon the throne of her mind; something utterly UNCOMPREHENDING, utterly unconscious OF, cosmically blind TO all human emotion; that spread itself like a veil over her own consciousness; that PLATED her thought—that was a strange word—why had it come to me—something that had set its mark upon her like—like—the gigantic claw print on the poppied field, the little print of the dragoned hall.

I caught at my mind, whirling I thought then in the grip of fantasy; strove by taking minute note of her to bring myself back to normal.

Her veils had slipped from her, baring her neck, her arms, the right shoulder. Under the smooth throat a buckle of dull gold held the sheer, diaphanous folds of the pale amber silk which swathed the high and rounded breasts, hiding no goddess curve of them.

A wide and golden girdle clasped the waist, covered the rounded hips and thighs. The long, narrow, and high-arched feet were shod with golden sandals, laced just below the rounded knees with flat turquoise studded bands.

And shining through the amber folds, as glowing above them, the miracle of her body.

The dream of master sculptor given life. A goddess of earth's youth reborn in Himalayan wilds.

She raised her eyes; broke the long silence.

“Now being with you,” she said dreamily, “there waken within me old thoughts, old wisdom, old questioning—all that I had forgotten and thought forgotten forever—”

The golden voice died—she who had spoken was gone from us, like the fading out of a phantom; like the breaking of a film.

A flicker shot over the skies, another and another. A brilliant ray of intense green like that of a distant searchlight swept to the zenith, hung for a moment and withdrew. Up came pouring the lances and the streamers of the aurora; faster and faster, banners and slender shining spears of green and iridescent blues and smoky, glistening reds.

The valley sprang into full view.

I felt Ventnor's grip upon my wrist. I followed his pointing finger. Into the valley from the right ran a black spur of rock, half a mile from us, fifty feet high.

Upon its crest stood—Norhala!

Her arms were lifted to the sparkling sky; her braids were loosened—and as the fires of the aurora rose and fell, raced and were still, the silken cloud of her tresses swirled and eddied with them. Little clouds of coruscations danced gaily like fireflies about and through it.

And all her bared body was outlined in living light, glowed and throbbed with light—light filled her like a vessel, she bathed in it. She thrust arms through the streaming, flaming locks; held them out from her, prisoned. She swayed slowly, rhythmically; like a faint, golden chiming came the echo of her song.

Abruptly around her, half circling her on the black spur, gleamed myriads of gem fires. Flares and flames of pale emerald, steady glowing of flame rubies, glints and lambencies of deepest sapphire, of wan sapphire, flickering opalescences, irised glitterings. A moment they gleamed. Then from them came bolt upon bolt of lightning—lightning that darted upon the lovely shape swaying there; lightnings that fell upon her, broke and dashed, cascading, from her radiant body.

The lightnings bathed her—she bathed in them.

The skies were covered by a swift mist. The aurora was veiled.

The valley filled with a palely shimmering radiance which dropped like veils upon it, hiding all within it. Hiding within fold upon luminous fold—Norhala!

CHAPTER VII. THE SHAPES IN THE MIST

Mutely we faced each other, white and wan in the ghostly light.

The valley was very still; as silent as though sound had been withdrawn from it. The shimmering radiance suffusing it had thickened perceptibly; hovered over the valley floor faintly sparkling mists; hid it.

Like a shroud was that silence. Beneath it my mind struggled, its unease, its forebodings growing ever stronger. Silently we repacked the saddlebags; girthed the pony; silently we waited for Norhala's return.

Idly I had noted that the place on which we stood must be raised above the level of the vale. Up toward us the gathering mists had been steadily rising; still was their wavering crest a half score feet below us.

Abruptly out of their dim nebulosity a faintly phosphorescent square broke. It lifted, slowly; then swept, a dully lustrous six-foot cube, up the slope and came to rest almost at our feet. It dwelt there; contemplated us from its myriads of deep-set, sparkling striations.

In its wake swam, one by one, six others—their tops raising from the vapors like the first, watchfully; like shimmering backs of sea monsters; like turrets of fantastic angled submarines from phosphorescent seas. One by one they skimmed swiftly over the ledge; and one by one they nestled, edge to edge and alternately, against the cube which had gone before.

In a crescent, they stretched before us. Back from them, a pace, ten paces, twenty, we retreated.

They lay immobile—staring at us.

Cleaving the mists, silk of copper hair streaming wide, unearthly eyes lambent, floated up behind them—Norhala. For an instant she was hidden behind their bulk; suddenly was upon them; drifted over them like some spirit of light; stood before us.

Her veils were again about her; golden girdle, sandals of gold and turquoise in their places. Pearl white her body gleamed; no mark of lightning marred it.

She walked toward us, turned and faced the watching cubes. She uttered no sound, but as at a signal the central cube slid forward, halted before her. She rested a hand upon its edge.

"Ride with me," she said to Ruth.

"Norhala." Ventnor took a step forward. "Norhala, we must go with her. And this"—he pointed to the pony—"must go with us."

"I meant—you—to come," the faraway voice chimed, "but I had not thought of—that."

A moment she considered; then turned to the six waiting cubes. Again as at a command four of the things moved, swirled in toward each other with a weird precision, with a monstrous martial mimicry; joined; stood before us, a platform twelve feet square, six high.

"Mount," sighed Norhala.

Ventnor looked helplessly at the sheer front facing him.

"Mount." There was half-wondering impatience in her command. "See!"

She caught Ruth by the waist and with the same bewildering swiftness with which she had vanished from us when the aurora beckoned she stood, holding the girl, upon the top of the single cube. It was as though the two had been lifted, had been levitated with an incredible rapidity.

"Mount," she murmured again, looking down upon us.

Slowly Ventnor began to bandage the pony's eyes. I placed my hand upon the edge of the quadruple; sprang. A myriad unseen hands caught me, raised me, set me instantaneously on the upward surface.

"Lift the pony to me," I called to Ventnor.

"Lift it?" he echoed, incredulously.

Drake's grin cut like a sunray through the nightmare dread that shrouded my mind.

"Catch," he called; placed one hand beneath the beast's belly, the other under its throat; his shoulders heaved—and up shot the pony, laden as it was, landed softly upon four wide-stretched legs beside me. The faces of the two gaped up, ludicrous in their amazement.

"Follow," cried Norhala.

Ventnor leaped wildly for the top, Drake beside him; in the flash of a humming-bird's wing they were gripping me, swearing feebly. The unseen hold angled; struck upward; clutched from ankle to thigh; held us fast—men and beast.

Away swept the block that bore Ruth and Norhala; I saw Ruth crouching, head bent, her arms around the knees of the woman. They slipped into the mists; vanished.

And after them, like a log in a racing current, we, too, dipped beneath the faintly luminous vapors.

The cubes moved with an entire absence of vibration; so smoothly and skimmingly, indeed, that had it not been for the sudden wind that had risen when first we had stirred, and that now beat steadily upon our faces, and the cloudy walls streaming by, I would have thought ourselves at rest.

I saw the blurred form of Ventnor drift toward the forward edge. He walked as though wading. I essayed to follow him; my feet I could not lift; I could advance only by gliding them as though skating.

Also the force, whatever it was, that held me seemed to pass me on from unseen clutch to clutch; it was as though up to my hips I moved through a closely woven yet fluid mass of cobwebs. I had the fantastic idea that if I so willed I could slip over the edge of the blocks, crawl about their sides without falling—like a fly on the vertical faces of a huge sugar loaf.

I drew beside Ventnor. He was staring ahead, striving, I knew, to pierce the mists for some glimpse of Ruth.

He turned to me, his face drawn with anxiety, his eyes feverish.

“Can you see them, Walter?” His voice shook. “God—why did I ever let her go like that? Why did I let her go alone?”

“They'll be close ahead, Martin.” I spoke out of a conviction I could not explain. “Whatever it is we're bound for, wherever it is the woman's taking us, she means to keep us together—for a time at least. I'm sure of it.”

“She said—follow.” It was Drake beside us. “How the hell can we do anything else? We haven't any control over this bird we're on. But she has. What she meant, Ventnor, is that it would follow her.”

“That's true”—new hope softened the haggard face—“that's true—but is it? We're reckoning with creatures that man's

imagination never conceived—nor could conceive. And with this—woman—human in shape, yes, but human in thought—never. How then can we tell—"

He turned once more, all his consciousness concentrated in his searching eyes.

Drake's rifle slipped from his hand.

He stooped to pick it up; then tugged with both hands. The rifle lay immovable.

I bent and strove to aid him. For all the pair of us could do, the rifle might have been a part of the gleaming surface on which it rested. The tiny, deepset star points winked up—

"They're—laughing at us!" grunted Drake.

"Nonsense," I answered, and tried to check the involuntary shuddering that shook me, as I saw it shake him. "Nonsense. These blocks are great magnets—that's what holds the rifle; what holds us, too."

"I don't mean the rifle," he said; "I mean those points of lights—the eyes—"

There came from Ventnor a cry of almost anguished relief. We straightened. Our head shot above the mists like those of swimmers from water. Unnoticed, we had been climbing out of them.

And a hundred yards ahead of us, cleaving them, veiled in them almost to the shoulders, was Norhala, red-gold tresses steaming; and close beside her were the brown curls of Ruth. At her brother's cry she turned and her arm flashed out of the veils with reassuring gesture.

A mile away was an opening in the valley's mountainous wall; toward it we were speeding. It was no ragged crevice, no nature split fissure; it gave the impression of a gigantic doorway.

"Look," whispered Drake.

Between us and the vast gateway, gleaming triangles began to break through the vapors, like the cutting fins of sharks, glints of round bodies like gigantic porpoises—the vapors seethed with them. Quickly the fins and rolling curves were all about us. They centered upon the portal, streamed through—a horde of the metal things, leading us, guarding us, playing about us.

And weird, unutterably weird was that spectacle—the vast and silent vale with its still, smooth vapors like a coverlet of cloud; the regal head of Norhala sweeping over them; the dull glint and gleam of the metal paradoxes flowing, in ordered motion, all about us; the titanic gateway, glowing before us.

We were at its threshold; over it.

CHAPTER VIII. THE DRUMS OF THUNDER

Upon that threshold the mists foamed like breaking billows, then ceased abruptly to be. Keeping exactly the distance I had noted when our gaze had risen above the fog, glided the block that bore Ruth and Norhala. In the strange light of the place into which we had emerged—and whether that place was canyon, corridor, or tunnel I could not then determine—it stood out sharply.

One arm of Norhala held Ruth—and in her attitude I sensed a shielding intent, guardianship—the first really human impulse this shape of mystery and beauty had revealed.

In front of them swept score upon score of her familiars—no longer dully lustrous, but shining as though cut from blue and polished steel. They—marched—in ordered rows, globes and cubes and pyramids; moving sedately now as units.

I looked behind me; out of the spume boiling at the portal, were pouring forth other scores of the Metal Things, darting through like divers through a wave. And as they drew into our wake and swam into the light, their dim lustre vanished like a film; their surfaces grew almost radiant.

Whence came the light that set them gleaming? Our pace had slackened—I looked about me. The walls of the cleft or tunnel were perpendicular, smooth and shining with a cold, metallic, greenish glow.

Between the walls, like rhythmic flashing of fire-flies, pulsed soft and fugitive glimmerings that carried a sense of the infinitely minute—of electrons, it came to me, rather than atoms. Their irradiance was greenish, like the walls; but I was certain that these corpuscles did not come from them.

They blinked and faded like motes within a shifting sunbeam; or, to use a more scientific comparison, like colloids within the illuminated field of the ultramicroscope; and like these latter it was as though the eyes took in not the minute particles themselves but their movement only.

Save for these gleamings the light of the place, although crepuscular, was crystalline clear. High above us—five hundred, a thousand feet—the walls merged into a haze of clouded beryl.

Rock certainly the cliffs were—but rock cut and planed, smoothed and polished and PLATED!

Yes, that was it—plated. Plated with some metallic substance that was itself a reservoir of luminosity and from which, it came to me, pulsed the force that lighted the winking ions. But who could have done such a thing? For what purpose? How?

And the meticulousness, the perfection of these smoothed cliffs struck over my nerves as no rasp could, stirring a vague resentment, an irritated desire for human inharmonies, human disorder.

Absorbed in my examination I had forgotten those who must share with me my doubts and dangers. I felt a grip on my arm.

"If we get close enough and I can get my feet loose from this damned thing I'll jump," Drake said.

"What?" I gasped, blankly, startled out of my preoccupation. "Jump where?"

I followed his pointing finger. We were rapidly closing upon the other cube; it was now a scant twenty paces ahead; it seemed to be stopping. Ventnor was leaning forward, quivering with eagerness.

"Ruth!" he called. "Ruth—are you all right?"

Slowly she turned to us—my heart gave a great leap, then seemed to stop. For her sweet face was touched with that same unearthly tranquillity which was Norhala's; in her brown eyes was a shadow of that passionless spirit brooding in Norhala's own; her voice as she answered held within it more than echo of Norhala's faint, far-off golden chiming.

"Yes," she sighed; "yes, Martin—have no fear for me—"

And turned from us, gazing forward once more with the woman and as silent as she.

I glanced covertly at Ventnor, at Drake—had I imagined, or had they too seen? Then I knew they had seen, for Ventnor's face was white to the lips, and Drake's jaw was set, his teeth clenched, his eyes blazing with anger.

“What's she doing to Ruth—you saw her face,” he gritted, half inarticulately.

“Ruth!” There was anguish in Ventnor's cry.

She did not turn again. It was as though she had not heard him.

The cubes were now not five yards apart. Drake gathered himself; strained to loosen his feet from the shining surface, making ready to leap when they should draw close enough. His great chest swelled with his effort, the muscles of his neck knotted, sweat steamed down his face.

“No use,” he gasped, “no use, Goodwin. It's like trying to lift yourself by your boot-straps—like a fly stuck in molasses.”

“Ruth,” cried Ventnor once more.

As though it had been a signal the block darted forward, resuming the distance it had formerly maintained between us.

The vanguard of the Metal Things began to race. With an incredible speed they fled into, were lost in an instant within, the luminous distances.

The cube that bore the woman and girl accelerated; flew faster and faster onward. And as swiftly our own followed it. The lustrous walls flowed by, dizzily.

We had swept over toward the right wall of the cleft and were gliding over a broad ledge. This ledge was, I judged, all of a hundred feet in width. From it the floor of the place was dropping rapidly.

The opposite precipices were slowly drawing closer. After us flowed the flanking host.

Steadily our ledge arose and the floor of the canyon dropped. Now we were twenty feet above it, now thirty. And the character of the cliffs was changing. Veins of quartz shone under the metallic plating like cut crystal, like cloudy opals; here was a splash of vermilion, there a patch of amber; bands of pallid ochre stained it.

My gaze was caught by a line of inky blackness in the exact center of the falling floor. So black was it that at first glance I took it for a vein of jetty lignite.

It widened. It was a crack, a fissure. Now it was a yard in width, now three, and blackness seemed to well up from within it, blackness that was the very essence of the depths. Steadily the ebon rift

expanded; spread suddenly wide open in two sharp-edged, flying wedges—

Earth had dropped away. At our side a gulf had opened, an abyss, striking down depth upon depth; profound; immeasurable.

We were human atoms, riding upon a steed of sorcery and racing along a split rampart of infinite space.

I looked behind—scores of the cubes were darting from the metal host trailing us; in a long column of twos they flashed by, raced ahead. Far in front of us a gloom began to grow; deepened until we were rushing into blackest night.

Through the murk stabbed a long lance of pale blue phosphorescence. It unrolled like a ribbon of wan flame, flicked like a serpent's tongue—held steady. I felt the Thing beneath us leap forward; its velocity grew prodigious; the wind beat upon us with hurricane force.

I shielded my eyes with my hands and peered through the chinks of my fingers. Ranged directly in our path was a barricade of the cubes and upon them we were racing like a flying battering-ram. Involuntarily I closed my eyes against the annihilating impact that seemed inevitable.

The Thing on which we rode lifted.

We were soaring at a long angle straight to the top of the barrier; were upon it, and still with that awful speed unchecked were hurtling through the blackness over the shaft of phosphorescence, the ribbon of pale light that I had watched pierce it and knew now was but another span of the cubes that but a little before had fled past us. Beneath the span, on each side of it, I sensed illimitable void.

We were over; rushing along in darkness. There began a mighty tumult, a vast crashing and roaring. The clangor waxed, beat about us with tremendous strokes of sound.

Far away was a dim glowing, as of rising sun through heavy mists of dawn. The mists faded—miles away gleamed what at first glimpse seemed indeed to be the rising sun; a gigantic orb, whose lower limb just touched, was sharply, horizontally cut by the blackness, as though at its base that blackness was frozen.

The sun? Reason returned to me; told me this globe could not be that.

What was it then? Ra-Harmachis, of the Egyptians, stripped of his wings, exiled and growing old in the corridors of the Dead? Or that mocking luminary, the cold phantom of the God of light and warmth which the old Norsemen believed was set in their frozen hell to torment the damned?

I thrust aside the fantasies, impatiently. But sun or no sun, light streamed from this orb, light in multicolored, lanced rays, banishing the blackness through which we had been flying.

Closer we came and closer; lighter it grew about us, and by the growing light I saw that still beside us ran the abyss. And even louder, more thunderous, became the clamor.

At the foot of the radiant disk I glimpsed a luminous pool. Into it, out of the depths, protruded a tremendous rectangular tongue, gleaming like gray steel.

On the tongue an inky shape appeared; it lifted itself from the abyss, rushed upon the disk and took form.

Like a gigantic spider it was, squat and horned. For an instant it was silhouetted against the smiling sphere, poised itself—and vanished through it.

Now, not far ahead, silhouetted as had been the spider shape, blackened into sight a cube and on it Ruth and Norhala. It seemed to hover, to wait.

“It's a door,” Drake's shout beat thinly in my ears against the hurricane of sound.

What I thought had been an orb was indeed a gateway, a portal; and it was gigantic.

The light streamed through it, the flaming colors, the lightning glare, the drifting shadows were all beyond it. The suggestion of sphere had been an illusion, born of the darkness in which we were moving and in its own luminescence.

And I saw that the steel tongue was a ramp, a slide, dropping down into the gulf.

Norhala raised her hands high above her head. Up from the darkness flew an incredible shape—like a monstrous, armored

flat-backed crab; angled spikes protruded from it; its huge body was spangled with darting, greenish flames.

It swept beneath us and by. On its back were multitudinous breasts from which issued blinding flashes—sapphire blue, emerald green, sun yellow. It hung poised as had that other nightmare shape, standing out jet black and colossal, rearing upon columnar legs, whose outlines were those of alternate enormous angled arrow-points and lunettes. Swiftly its form shifted; an instant it hovered, half disintegrate.

Now I saw spinning spheres and darting cubes and pyramids click into new positions. The front and side legs lengthened, the back legs shortened, fitting themselves plainly to what must be a varying angle of descent beyond.

And it was no chimera, no kraken of the abyss. It was a car made of the Metal Things. I caught again the flashes and thought that they were jewels or heaps of shining ores carried by the conscious machine.

It vanished. In its place hung poised the cube that bore the enigmatic woman and Ruth. Then they were gone and we stood where but an instant before they had been.

We were high above an ocean of living light—a sea of incandescent splendors that stretched mile upon uncounted mile away and whose incredible waves streamed thousands of feet in air, flew in gigantic banners, in tremendous streamers, in coruscating clouds of varicolored flame—as though torn by the talons of a mighty wind.

My dazzled sight cleared, glare and blaze and searing incandescence took form, became ordered. Within the sea of light I glimpsed shapes cyclopean, unnameable.

They moved slowly, with an awesome deliberateness. They shone darkly within the flame-woven depths. From them came the volleys of the lightnings.

Score upon score of them there were—huge and enigmatic. Their flaming levins threaded the shimmering veils, patterned them, as though they were the flying robes of the very spirit of fire.

And the tumult was as ten thousand Thors, smiting with hammers against the enemies of Odin. As a forge upon whose shouting anvils was being shaped a new world.

A new world? A metal world!

The thought spun through my mazed brain, was gone—and not until long after did I remember it. For suddenly all that clamor died; the lightnings ceased; all the flitting radiances paled and the sea of flaming splendors grew thin as moving mists. The storming shapes dulled with them, seemed to darken into the murk.

Through the fast-waning light and far, far away—miles it seemed on high and many, many miles in length—a broad band of fluorescent amethyst shone. From it dropped curtains, shimmering, nebulous as the marching folds of the aurora; they poured, cascaded, from the amethystine band.

Huge and purple-black against their opalescence bulked what at first I thought a mountain, so like was it to one of those fantastic buttes of our desert Southwest when their castellated tops are silhouetted against the setting sun; knew instantly that this was but subconscious striving to translate into terms of reality the incredible.

It was a City!

A city full five thousand feet high and crowned with countless spires and turrets, titanic arches, stupendous domes! It was as though the man-made cliffs of lower New York were raised scores of times their height, stretched a score of times their length. And weirdly enough it did suggest those same towering masses of masonry when one sees them blacken against the twilight skies.

The pit darkened as though night were filtering down into it; the vast, purple-shadowed walls of the city sparkled out with countless lights. From the crowning arches and turrets leaped broad filaments of flame, flashing, electric.

Was it my straining eyes, the play of the light and shadow—or were those high-flung excrescences shifting, changing shape? An icy hand stretched out of the unknown, stilled my heart. For they were shifting—arches and domes, turrets and spires; were melting, reappearing in ferment; like the lightning-threaded, rolling edges of the thundercloud.

I wrenched my gaze away; saw that our platform had come to rest upon a broad and silvery ledge close to the curving frame of the portal and not a yard from where upon her block stood Norhala, her

arm clasped about the rigid form of Ruth. I heard a sigh from Ventnor, an exclamation from Drake.

Before one of us could cry out to Ruth, the cube glided to the edge of the shelf, dipped out of sight.

That upon which we rode trembled and sped after it.

There came a sickening sense of falling; we lurched against each other; for the first time the pony whinnied, fearfully. Then with awful speed we were flying down a wide, a glistening, a steeply angled ramp into the Pit, straight toward the half-hidden, soaring escarpments flashing afar.

Far ahead raced the Thing on which stood woman and maid. Their hair streamed behind them, mingled, silken web of brown and shining veil of red-gold; little clouds of sparkling corpuscles threaded them, like flitting swarms of fire-flies; their bodies were nimbused with tiny, flickering tongues of lavender flame.

About us, above us, began again to rumble the countless drums of the thunder.

CHAPTER IX. THE PORTAL OF FLAME

It was as though we were on a meteor hurtling through space. The split air shrieked and shrilled, a keening barrier against the avalanche of the thunder. The blast bent us far back on thighs held rigid by the magnetic grip.

The pony spread its legs, dropped its head; through the hurricane roaring its screaming pierced thinly, that agonizing, terrible lamentation which is of the horse and the horse alone when the limit of its endurance is reached.

Ventnor crouched lower and lower, eyes shielded behind arms folded over his brows, straining for a glimpse of Ruth; Drake crouched beside him, bracing him, supporting him against the tempest.

Our line of flight became less abrupt, but the speed increased, the wind-pressure became almost insupportable. I twisted, dropped upon my right arm, thrust my head against my shoulder, stared backward. When first I had looked upon the place I had sensed its immensity; now I began to realize how vast it must really be—for already the gateway through which we had come glimmered far away on high, shrunk to a hoop of incandescent brass and dwindling fast.

Nor was it a cavern; I saw the stars, traced with deep relief the familiar Northern constellations. Pit it might be, but whatever terror, whatever ordeals were before us, we would not have to face them buried deep within earth. There was a curious comfort to me in the thought.

Suddenly stars and sky were blotted out.

We had plunged beneath the surface of the radiant sea.

Lying in the position in which I was, I was sensible of a diminution of the cyclonic force; the blast streamed up and over the front of the cube. To me drifted only the wailings of our flight and the whimpering terror of the pony.

I turned my head cautiously. Upon the very edge of the flying blocks squatted Drake and Ventnor, grotesquely frog-like. I crawled toward them—crawled, literally, like a caterpillar; for wherever my body touched the surface of the cubes the attracting force held it,

allowed a creeping movement only, surface sliding upon surface—and weirdly enough like a human measuring-worm I looped myself over to them.

As my bare palms clung to the Things I realized with finality that whatever their activation, their life, they WERE metal.

There was no mistaking now the testimony of touch. Metal they were, with a hint upon contact of highly polished platinum, or at the least of a metal as finely grained as it.

Also they had temperature, a curiously pleasant warmth—the surfaces were, I judged, around ninety-five degrees Fahrenheit. I looked deep down into the little sparkling points that were, I knew, organs of sight; they were like the points of contact of innumerable intersecting crystal planes. They held strangest paradoxical suggestion of being close to the surface and still infinite distances away.

And they were like—what was it they were like?—it came to me with a distinct shock.

They were like the galaxies of little aureate and sapphire stars in the clear gray heavens of Norhala's eyes.

I crept beside Drake, struck him with my head.

"Can't move," I shouted. "Can't lift my hands. Stuck fast—like a fly—just as you said."

"Drag 'em over your knees," he cried, bending to me. "It slides 'em out of the attraction."

Acting as he had suggested I found to my astonishment I could slip my hands free; I caught his belt, tried to lift myself by it.

"No use, Doc." The old grin lightened for a moment his tense young face. "You'll have to keep praying till the power's turned off. Nothing here you can slide your knees on."

I nodded, waddling close to his side; then sank back on my haunches to relieve the strain upon my aching leg-muscles.

"Can you see them ahead, Walter—Ruth and the woman?" Ventnor turned his anxious eyes toward me.

I peered into the glimmering murk; shook my head. I could see nothing. It was indeed, as though the clustered cubes sped within a bubble of the now wanly glistening vapors; or rather as though in

our passage—as a projectile does in air—we piled before us a thick wave of the mists which streaming along each side, closing in behind, obscured all that lay around.

Yet I had, persistently, the feeling that beyond these shroudings was vast and ordered movement; marchings and counter-marchings of hosts greater even than those Golden Hordes of Genghis which ages agone had washed about the outer bases of the very peaks that hid this place. Came, too, flitting shadowings of huge shapes, unnameable, moving swiftly beside our way; gleamings that thrust themselves through the veils like wheeling javelins of flame.

And always, always, everywhere that constant movement, rhythmic, terrifying—like myriads of feet of creatures of an unseen, stranger world marking time just outside the threshold of our own. Preparing, DRILLING there in some wide vestibule of space between the known and the unknown, alert and menacing—poised for the signal which would send them pouring over it.

Once again I seemed to stand upon the brink of an abyss of incredible revelation, striving helplessly, struggling for realization—and so struggling became aware that our speed was swiftly slackening, the roaring blast dying down, the veils before us thinning.

They cleared away. I saw Drake and Ventnor straighten up; raised myself to my own aching knees.

We were at one end of a vortex, a funneling within the radiant vapors; a funnel whose further end a mile ahead broadened out into a huge circle, its mistily outlined edges impinging upon the towering scarp of the—city. It was as though before us lay, upon its side, a cone of crystalline clear air against whose curved sides some radiant medium heavier than air, lighter than water, pressed.

The top arc of its prostrate base reached a thousand feet or more up the precipitous wall; above it all was hidden in sparkling nebulosities that were like still clouds of greenly glimmering fire-flies. Back from the curving sides of this cone, above it and below it, the pressing luminosities stretched into, it seemed, infinite distances.

Through them, suddenly, thousands of bright beams began to dart, to dance, weaving and interweaving, shooting hither and

yon—like myriads of great searchlights in a phosphorescent sea fog, like countless lances of the aurora thrusting through its own iridescent veils! And in the play of these beams was something appallingly ordered, appallingly rhythmic.

It was—how can I describe it?—PURPOSEFUL; purposeful as the geometric shiftings of the Little Things of the ruins, of the summoning song of Norhala, of the Protean changes of the Smiting Shape and the Following Thing; and like all of these it was as laden with that baffling certainty of hidden meanings, of messages that the brain recognized as such yet knew it never could read.

The rays seemed to spring upward from the earth. Now they were like countless lances of light borne by marching armies of Titans; now they crossed and angled and flew as though they were clouds of javelins hurled by battling swarms of the Genii of Light. And now they stood upright while through them, thrusting them aside, bending them, passed vast, vague shapes like mountains forming and dissolving; like darkening monsters of some world of light pushing through thick forests of slender, high-reaching trees of cold flame; shifting shadows of monstrous chimerae slipping through jungles of bamboo with trunks of diamond fire; phantasmal leviathans swimming through brakes of giant reeds of radiance rising from the sparking ooze of a sea of star shine.

Whence came the force, the mechanism that produced this cone of clarity, this NOT searchlight, but unlight in the midst of light? Not from behind, that was certain—for turning I saw that behind us the mist was as thick. I turned again—it came to me, why I knew not, yet with an absolute certainty, that the energy, the force emanated from the distant wall itself.

The funnel, the cone, did not expand from where we were standing, now motionless.

It began at the wall and focused upon us.

Within the great circle the surface of the wall was smooth, utterly blank; upon it was no trace of those flitting lights we had seen before we had plunged down toward the radiant sea. It shone with a pale blue phosphorescence. It was featureless, smooth, a blind cliff of polished, blue metal—and that was all.

“Ruth!” groaned Ventnor. “Where is she?”

Aghast at my mental withdrawal from him, angry at myself for my callousness, awkwardly I tried to crawl over to him, to touch him, comfort him as well as I might.

And then, as though his cry had been a signal, the great cone began to move. Slowly the circled base slipped down the shimmering facades; down, steadily down; I realized that we had paused at the edge of some steep declivity, for the bottom of the cone was now at a decided angle while the upper edge of the circle had dropped a full two hundred feet below the place where it had rested—and still it fell.

There came a gasp of relief from Ventnor, a sigh from Drake while, from my own heart, a weight rolled. Not ten yards ahead of us and still deep within the luminosity had appeared the regal head of Norhala, the lovely head of Ruth. The two rose out of the glow like swimmers floating from the depths. Now they were clear before us, and now we could see the surface of the cube on which they rode.

But neither turned to us; each stared straightly, motionless along the axis of the sinking cone, the woman's left arm holding Ruth close to her side.

Drake's hand caught my shoulder in a grip that hurt—nor did he need to point toward that which had wrung the exclamation from him. The funnel had broken from its slow falling; it had made one swift, startling drop and had come to rest. Its recumbent side was now flattened into a triangular plane, widening from the narrow tip in which we stood to all of five hundred feet where its base rested against the blue wall, and falling at a full thirty-degree pitch.

The misty-edged circle had become an oval, a flattened ellipse another five hundred feet high and three times that in length. And in its exact center, shining forth as though it opened into a place of pale azure incandescence was another rectangular Cyclopean portal.

On each side of it, in the apparently solid face of the gleaming, metallic cliffs, a slit was opening.

They began as thin lines a hundred yards in height through which the intense light seemed to hiss; quickly they opened—widening like monstrous cat pupils until at last, their widening ceasing, they glared forth, the blue incandescence gushing from them like molten steel from an opened sluice.

Deep within them I sensed a movement. Scores of towering shapes swam within and glided out of them, each reflecting the vivid light as though they themselves were incandescent. Around their crests spun wide and flaming coronets.

They rushed forth, wheeling, whirling, driven like leaves in a whirlwind. Out they swirled from the cat's eyes of the glimmering wall, these dervish obelisks crowded with spinning fires. They vanished in the mists. Instantly with their going, the eyes contracted; were but slits; were gone. And before us within the oval was only the waiting portal.

The leading block leaped forward. As abruptly, those that bore us followed. Again under that strain of projectile flight we clutched each other; the pony screamed in terror. The metal cliff rushed to meet us like a thunder cloud of steel; the portal raced upon us—a square mouth of cold blue flame.

And into it we swept; were devoured by it.

Light in blinding, intolerable flood beat about us, blackening the sight with agony. We pressed, the three of us, against the side of the pony, burying our faces in its shaggy coat, striving to hide our eyes from the radiance which, strain closely as we might, seemed to pierce through the body of the little beast, through our own heads, searing the sight.

CHAPTER X. “WITCH! GIVE BACK MY SISTER”

How long we were within that glare I do not know; it seemed unending hours; it was of course only minutes—seconds, perhaps. Then I was sensible of a permeating shadow, a darkness gentle and healing.

I raised my head and opened my eyes. We were moving tranquilly, with a curious suggestion of homing leisureliness, through a soft, blue shimmering darkness. It was as though we were drifting within some high borderland of light; a region in which that rapid vibration we call the violet was mingled with a still more rapid vibration whose quick pulsing was felt by the brain but ever fled ere that brain could register it in terms of color. And there seemed to be a film over my sight; dazzlement from the unearthly blaze, I thought, shaking my head impatiently.

My eyes focused upon an object a little more than a foot away; my neck grew rigid, my scalp prickled while I stared, unbelieving. And that at which I stared was—a skeleton hand. Every bone a grayish black, sharply silhouetted, clean as some master surgeon's specimen, it was extended as though clutching at—clutching at—what was that toward which it was reaching?

Again the icy prickling over scalp and skin—for its talons stretched out to grasp a steed that Death himself might have ridden, a rack whose bare skull hung drooping upon bent vertebrae.

I raised my hands to my face to shut out the ghostly sight—and swiftly the clutching bony hand moved toward me—was before my eyes—touched me.

The cry that sheer horror wrested from me was strangled by realization. And so acute was my relief, so reassuring was it to have in the midst of these mysteries some sane, understandable thing occur that I laughed aloud.

For the skeleton hand was my own. The mournful ghastly mount of death was—our pony. And when I looked again I knew what I would see—and see them I did—two tall skeletons, skulls resting on their bony arms, leaning against the frame of the beast.

While ahead of us, floating poised upon the surface of the glistening cube, were two women skeletons—Ruth and Norhala!

Weird enough was the sight. Dureresque, grimly awful as materialization of a scene of the Dance Macabre—and yet—vastly comforting.

For here was something which was well within the range of human knowledge. It was the light about us that did it; a vibration that even as I conjectured, was within the only partly explored region of the ultraviolet and the comparatively unexplored region above it.

Yet there were differences, for there was none of that misty halo around the bones, the flesh which the X-rays cannot render wholly invisible. The skeletons stood out clean cut, with no trace of fleshly vestments.

I crept over, spoke to the two.

"Don't look up yet," I said. "Don't open your eyes. We're going through a queer light. It has an X-ray quality. You're going to see me as a skeleton—"

"What?" shouted Drake. Disobeying my warning he straightened, glared at me. And disquieting as the spectacle had been before, fully understanding it as I did, I could not restrain my shudder at the utter weirdness of that skull which was his head thrusting itself toward me.

The skeleton that was Ventnor turned to me; was arrested by the sight of the flitting pair ahead. I saw the fleshless jaws clamp, then opened to speak.

Abruptly, upon the skeletons in front the flesh dropped back. Girl and woman stood there once again robed in beauty.

So swift was that transition from the grisly unreal to the normal that even to my unsuperstitious mind it smacked of necromancy. The next instant the three of us stood looking at each other, clothed once more in the flesh, and the pony no longer the steed of death, but our shaggy, patient little companion.

The light had changed; the high violet had gone from it, and it was shot with yellow gleamings like fugitive sunbeams. We were passing through a wide corridor that seemed to be unending. The yellow light grew stronger.

“That light wasn't exactly the Roentgen variety,” Drake interrupted my absorption in our surroundings. “And I hope to God it's as different as it seemed. If it's not we may be up against a lot of trouble.”

“More trouble than we're in?” I asked, a trifle satirically.

“X-ray burns,” he answered, “and no way to treat them in this place—if we live to want treatment,” he ended grimly.

“I don't think we were subjected to their action long enough—” I began, and was silent.

The corridor had opened without warning into a place for whose immensity I have no images that are adequate. It was a chamber that was vaster than ten score of the Great Halls of Karnac in one; great as that fabled hall in dread Amenti where Osiris sits throned between the Searcher of Hearts and the Eater of Souls, judging the jostling hosts of the newly dead.

Temple it was in its immensity, and its solemn vastness—but unlike any temple ever raised by human toil. In no ruin of earth's youth giants' work now crumbling under the weight of time had I ever sensed a shadow of the strangeness with which this was instinct. No—nor in the shattered fanes that once had held the gods of old Egypt, nor in the pillared shrines of Ancient Greece, nor Imperial Rome, nor mosque, basilica nor cathedral.

All these had been dedicated to gods which, whether created by humanity as science believes, or creators of humanity as their worshippers believed, still held in them that essence we term human.

The spirit, the force, that filled this place had in it nothing, NOTHING of the human.

No place? Yes, there was one—Stonehenge. Within that monolithic circle I had felt a something akin to this, as inhuman; a brooding spirit stony, stark, unyielding—as though not men but a people of stone had raised the great Menhirs.

This was a sanctuary built by a people of metal!

It was filled with a soft yellow glow like pale sunshine. Up from its floor arose hundreds of tremendous, square pillars down whose polished sides the crocus light seemed to flow.

Far, far as the gaze could reach, the columns marched, oppressively ordered, appallingly mathematical. From their massiveness distilled a sense of power, mysterious, mechanical yet—living; something priestly, hierophantic—as though they were guardians of a shrine.

Now I saw whence came the light suffusing this place. High up among the pillars floated scores of orbs that shone like pale gilt frozen suns. Great and small, through all the upper levels these strange luminaries gleamed, fixed and motionless, hanging unsupported in space. Out from their shining spherical surfaces darted rays of the same pale gold, rigid, unshifting, with the same suggestion of frozen stillness.

"They look like big Christmas-tree stars," muttered Drake.

"They're lights," I answered. "Of course they are. They're not matter—not metal, I mean—"

"There's something about them like St. Elmo's fire, witch lights—condensations of atmospheric electricity," Ventnor's voice was calm; now that it was plain we were nearing the heart of this mystery in which we were enmeshed he had clearly taken fresh grip, was again his observant, scientific self.

We watched, once more silent; and indeed we had spoken little since we had begun that ride whose end we sensed close. In the unfolding of enigmatic happening after happening the mind had deserted speech and crouched listening at every door of sight and hearing to gather some clue to causes, some thread of understanding.

Slowly now we were gliding through the forest of pillars; so effortless, so smooth our flight that we seemed to be standing still, the tremendous columns flitting past us, turning and wheeling around us, dizzyingly. My head swam with the mirage motion, I closed my eyes.

"Look," Drake was shaking me. "Look. What do you make of that?"

Half a mile ahead the pillars stopped at the edge of a shimmering, quivering curtain of green luminescence. High, high up past the pale gilt suns its smooth folds ran, into the golden amber mist that canopied the columns.

In its sparkling was more than a hint of the dancing corpuscles of the aurora; it was, indeed, as though woven of the auroral rays. And all about it played shifting, tremulous shadows formed by the merging of the golden light with the curtain's emerald gleaming.

Up to its base swept the cube that bore Ruth and Norhala—and stopped. From it leaped the woman, and drew Ruth down beside her, then turned and gestured toward us.

That upon which we rode drew close. I felt it quiver beneath me; felt on the instant, the magnetic grip drop from me, angle downward and leave me free. Shakily I arose from aching knees, and saw Ventnor flash down and run, rifle in hand, toward his sister.

Drake bent for his gun. I moved unsteadily toward the side of the clustered cubes. There came a curious pushing motion driving me to the edge. Sliding over upon me came Drake and the pony—

The cube tilted, gently, playfully—and with the slightest of jars the three of us stood beside it on the floor, we two men gaping at it in renewed wonder, and the little beast stretching its legs, lifting its feet and whinnying with relief.

Then abruptly the four blocks that had been our steed broke from each other; that which had been the woman's glided to them.

The four clicked into place behind it and darted from sight.

“Ruth!” Ventnor's voice was vibrant with his fear. “Ruth! What is wrong with you? What has she done to you?”

We ran to his side. He stood clutching her hands, searching her eyes. They were wide, unseeing, dream filled. Upon her face the calm and stillness, which were mirrored reflections of Norhala's unearthly tranquillity, had deepened.

“Brother.” The sweet voice seemed far away, drifting out of untroubled space, an echo of Norhala's golden chimings—“Brother, there is nothing wrong with me. Indeed—all is—well with me—brother.”

He dropped the listless palms, faced the woman, tall figure tense, drawn with mingled rage and anguish.

“What have you done to her?” he whispered in Norhala's own tongue.

Her serene gaze took him in, undisturbed by his anger save for the faintest shadow of wonder, of perplexity.

“Done?” she repeated, slowly. “I have stilled all that was troubled within her—have lifted her above sorrow. I have given her the peace—as I will give it to you if—”

“You'll give me nothing,” he interrupted fiercely; then, his passion breaking through all restraint—“Yes, you damned witch—you'll give me back my sister!”

In his rage he had spoken English; she could not, of course, have understood the words, but their anger and hatred she did understand. Her serenity quivered, broke. The strange stars within her eyes began to glitter forth as they had when she had summoned the Smiting Thing. Unheeding, Ventnor thrust out a hand, caught her roughly by one bare, lovely shoulder.

“Give her back to me, I say!” he cried. “Give her back to me!”

The woman's eyes grew—awful. Out of the distended pupils the strange stars blazed; upon her face was something of the goddess outraged. I felt the shadow of Death's wings.

“No! No—Norhala! No, Martin!” the veils of inhuman calm shrouding Ruth were torn; swiftly the girl we knew looked out from them. She threw herself between the two, arms outstretched.

“Ventnor!” Drake caught his arms, held them tight; “that's not the way to save her!”

Ventnor stood between us, quivering, half sobbing. Never until then had I realized how great, how absorbing was that love of his for Ruth. And the woman saw it, too, even though dimly; envisioned it humanly. For, under the shock of human passion, that which I thought then as utterly unknown to her as her cold serenity was to us, the sleeping soul—I use the popular word for those emotional complexes that are peculiar to mankind—stirred, awakened.

Wrath fled from her knitted brows; her eyes dropping to the girl, lost their dreadfulness; softened. She turned them upon Ventnor, they brooded upon him; within their depths a half-troubled interest, a questioning.

A smile dawned upon the exquisite face, humanizing it, transfiguring it, touching with tenderness the sweet and sleeping mouth—as a hovering dream the lips of the slumbering maid.

And on the face of Ruth, as upon a mirror, I watched that same slow, understanding tenderness reflected!

“Come,” said Norhala, and led the way through the sparkling curtains. As she passed, an arm around Ruth's neck, I saw the marks of Ventnor's fingers upon her white shoulder, staining its purity, marring it like a blasphemy.

For an instant I hung behind, watching their figures grow misty within the shining shadows; then followed hastily. Entering the mists I was conscious of a pleasant tingling, an acceleration of the pulse, an increase of that sense of well-being which, I grew suddenly aware, had since the beginning of our strange journey minimized the nervous attrition of constant contact with the abnormal.

Striving to classify, to reduce to order, my sensations I drew close to the others, overtaking them in a dozen paces. A dozen paces more and we stepped out of the curtainings.

CHAPTER XI. THE METAL EMPEROR

We stood at the edge of a well whose walls were of that same green vaporous iridescence through which we had just come, but finer grained, compact; as though here the corpuscles of which they were woven were far closer spun. Thousands of feet above us the mighty cylinder uprose, and in the lessened circle that was its mouth I glimpsed the bright stars; and knew by this it opened into the free air.

All of half a mile in diameter was this shaft, and ringed regularly along its height by wide amethystine bands—like rings of a hollow piston. They were, in color, replicas of that I had glimpsed before our descent into this place and against whose gleaming cataracts the outlines of the incredible city had lowered. And they were in motion, spinning smoothly, and swiftly.

Only one swift glance I gave them, my eyes held by a most extraordinary—edifice—altar—machine—I could not find the word for it—then.

Its base was a scant hundred yards from where we had paused and concentric with the sides of the pit. It stood upon a thick circular pedestal of what appeared to be cloudy rock crystal supported by hundreds of thick rods of the same material.

Up from it lifted the structure, a thing of glistening cones and spinning golden disks; fantastic yet disquietingly symmetrical; bizarre as an angled headdress worn by a mountainous Javanese god—yet coldly, painfully mathematical. In every direction the cones pointed, seemingly interwoven of strands of metal and of light.

What was their color? It came to me—that of the mysterious element which stains the sun's corona, that diadem seen only when our day star is in eclipse; the unknown element which science has named coronium, which never yet has been found on earth and that may be electricity in its one material form; electricity that is ponderable; force whose vibrations are keyed down to mass; power transmuted into substance.

Thousands upon thousands the cones bristled, pyramiding to the base of one tremendous spire that tapered up almost to the top of the shaft itself.

In their grouping the mind caught infinite calculations carried into infinity; an apotheosis of geometry compassing the rhythms of unknown spatial dimensions; concentration of the equations of the star hordes.

The mathematics of the Cosmos.

From the left of the crystalline base swept an enormous sphere. It was twice the height of a tall man, and it was a paler blue than any of these Things I had seen, almost, indeed, an azure; different, too, in other subtle, indefinable ways.

Behind it glided a pair of the pyramidal shapes, their pointed tips higher by a yard or more than the top of the sphere. They paused—regarding us. Out from the opposite arc of the crystal pedestal moved six other globes, somewhat smaller than the first and of a deep purplish luster.

They separated, lining up on each side of the leader now standing a little in advance of the twin tetrahedrons, rigid and motionless as watching guards.

There they stood—that enigmatic row, intent, studying us beneath their god or altar or machine of cones and disks within their cylinder walled with light.

And at that moment there crystallized within my consciousness the sublimation of all the strangenesses of all that had gone before, a panic loneliness as though I had wandered into an alien world—a world as unfamiliar to humanity, as unfamiliar with it as our own would seem to a thinking, mobile crystal adrift among men.

Norhala raised her white arms in salutation; from her throat came a lilting theme of her weirdly ordered, golden chanting. Was it speech, I wondered; and if so—prayer or entreaty or command?

The great sphere quivered and undulated. Swifter than the eye could follow it dilated; opened!

Where the azure globe had been, flashed out a disk of flaming splendors, the very secret soul of flowered flame! And simultaneously the pyramids leaped up and out behind it—two gigantic, four-rayed stars blazing with cold blue fires.

The green auroral curtainings flared out, ran with streaming radiance—as though some Spirit of Jewels had broken bonds of enchantment and burst forth jubilant, flooding the shaft with its

freed glories. Norhala's song ceased; an arm dropped down upon the shoulders of Ruth.

Then woman and girl began to float toward the radiant disk.

As one, the three of us sprang after them. I felt a shock that was like a quick, abrupt tap upon every nerve and muscle, stiffening them into helpless rigidity.

Paralyzing that sharp, unseen contact had been, but nothing of pain followed it. Instead it created an extraordinary acuteness of sight and hearing, an abnormal keying up of the observational faculties, as though the energy so mysteriously drawn from our motor centers had been thrown back into the sensory.

I could take in every minute detail of the flashing miracle of gemmed fires and its flaming ministers. Halfway between them and us Norhala and Ruth drifted; I could catch no hint of voluntary motion on their part and knew that they were not walking, but were being borne onward by some manifestation of that same force which held us motionless.

I forgot them in my contemplation of the Disk.

It was oval, twenty feet in height, I judged, and twelve in its greatest width. A broad band, translucent as sun golden chrysolite, ran about its periphery.

Set within this zodiac and spaced at mathematically regular intervals were nine ovoids of intensely living light. They shone like nine gigantic cabochon cut sapphires; they ranged from palest, watery blue up through azure and purple and down to a ghostly mauve shot with sullen undertones of crimson.

In each of them was throned a flame that seemed the very fiery essence of vitality.

The—BODY—was convex, swelling outward like the boss of a shield; shimmering rosy-gray and crystalline. From the vital ovoids ran a pattern of sparkling threads, irised and brilliant as floss of molten jewels; converging with interfacings of spirals, of volutes and of triangles into the nucleus.

And that nucleus, what was it?

Even now I can but guess—brain in part as we understand brain, certainly; but far, far more than that in its energies, its powers.

It was like an immense rose. An incredible rose of a thousand close clustering petals. It blossomed with a myriad shifting hues. And instant by instant the flood of varicolored flame that poured into its petalings down from the sapphire ovoids waxed and waned in crescendoes and diminuendoes of relucent harmonies—ecstatic, awesome.

The heart of the rose was a star of incandescent ruby.

From the flaming crimson center to aureate, flashing penumbra it was instinct with and poured forth power—power vast and conscious.

Not with that same completeness could I realize the ministering star shapes, half hidden as they were by the Disk. Their radiance was less, nor had they its miracle of pulsing gem fires. Blue they were, blue of a peculiar vibrancy, and blue were the glistening threads that ran down from blue-black circular convexities set within each of the points visible to me.

Unlike in shape, their flame of vitality dimmer than the ovoids of the Disk's golden zone, still I knew that they were even as those—ORGANS, organs of unknown senses, unknown potentialities. Their nuclei I could not observe.

The floating figures had drawn close to that disk and had paused.

And on the moment of their pausing I felt a surge of strength, a snapping of the spell that had bound us, an instantaneous withdrawal of the inhibiting force. Ventnor broke into a run, holding his rifle at the alert. We raced after him; were close to the shining shapes. And, gasping, we stopped short not a dozen paces away.

For Norhala had soared up toward the flaming rose of the Disk as though lifted by gentle, unseen hands. Close to it for an instant she swung. I saw the exquisite body gleam through her thin robes as though bathed in soft flames of rosy pearl.

Higher she floated, and toward the right of the zodiac. From the edges of three of the ovoids swirled a little cloud of tentacles, gossamer filaments of opal. They whipped out a full yard from the Disk's surface, touching her, caressing her.

For a moment she hung there, her face hidden from us; then was dropped softly to her feet and stood, arms stretched wide, her copper hair streaming cloudily about her regal head.

And up past her floated Ruth, levitated as had been she—and her face, ecstatic as though she were gazing into Paradise, yet drenched with the tranquillity of the infinite. Her wide eyes stared up toward that rose of splendors through which the pulsing colors now raced more swiftly. She hung poised before it while around her head a faint aureole began to form.

Again the gossamer threads thrust forth, searched her. They ran over her rough clothing—perplexedly. They coiled about her neck, stole through her hair, brushed shut her eyes, circled her brow, her breasts, girdled her.

Weirdly was it like some intelligence observing, studying, some creature of another species—puzzled by its similarity and unsimilarity with the one other creature of its kind it knew, and striving to reconcile those differences. And like such a questioning brain calling upon others for counsel, it swung Ruth upward to the watching star at the right.

A rifle shot rang out.

Another—the reports breaking the silence like a profanation. Unseen by either of us, Ventnor had slipped to one side where he could cover the core of ruby flame that must have seemed to him the heart of the Disk's rose of fire. He knelt a few yards away, white lipped, eyes cold gray ice, sighting carefully for a third shot.

“Don't! Martin—don't fire!” I shouted, leaping toward him.

“Stop! Ventnor—” Drake's panic cry mingled with my own.

But before we could reach him, Norhala flew to him, like a darting swallow. Down the face of the Disk glided the upright body of Ruth, struck softly, stood swaying.

And out of the blue-black convexity within a star point of one of the opened pyramids a lance of intense green flame darted, a lightning bolt as real as any hurled by tempest, upon Ventnor.

The shattered air closed behind the streaming spark with the sound of breaking glass.

It struck—Norhala.

It struck her. It seemed to splash upon her, to run down her like water. One curling tongue writhed over her bare shoulder and leaped to the barrel of the rifle in Ventnor's hands. It flashed up it and licked him. The gun was torn from his grip, hurled high in air,

exploding as it went. He leaped convulsively from his knees and dropped.

I heard a wailing, low, bitter and heartbroken. Past us ran Ruth, all dream, all unearthliness gone from a face now a tragic mask of human woe and terror. She threw herself down beside her brother, felt of his heart; then raised herself upon her knees and thrust out supplicating hands to the shapes.

“Don't hurt him any more! He didn't mean it!” she cried out to them piteously—like a child. She reached up, caught one of Norhala's hands. “Norhala—don't let them kill him. Don't let them hurt him any more. Please!” she sobbed.

Beside me I heard Drake cursing.

“If they touch her I'll kill the woman! I will, by God I will!” He strode to Norhala's side.

“If you want to live, call off these devils of yours.” His voice was strangled.

She looked at him, wonder deepening on the tranquil brow, in the clear, untroubled gaze. Of course she could not understand his words—but it was not that which made my own sick apprehension grow.

It was that she did not understand what called them forth. Did not even understand what reason lay behind Ruth's sorrow, Ruth's prayer.

And more and more wondering grew in her eyes as she looked from the threatening Drake to the supplicating Ruth, and from them to the still body of Ventnor.

“Tell her what I say, Goodwin. I mean it.”

I shook my head. That was not the way, I knew. I looked toward the Disk, still flanked with its sextette of spheres, still guarded by the flaming blue stars. They were motionless, calm, watching. I sensed no hostility, no anger; it was as though they were waiting for us to—to—waiting for us to do what?

It came to me—they were indifferent. That was it—as indifferent as we could be to the struggle of an ephemera; and as mildly curious.

“Norhala,” I turned to the woman, “she would not have him suffer; she would not have him die. She loves him.”

“Love?” she repeated, and all of her wonderment seemed crystallized in the word. “Love?” she asked.

“She loves him,” I said; and then, why I did not know, but I added, pointing to Drake: “and he loves her.”

There was a tiny, astonished sob from Ruth. Again Norhala brooded over her. Then with a little despairing shake of her head, she paced over and faced the great Disk.

Tensely we waited. Communication there was between them, interchange of—thought; how carried out I would not hazard even to myself.

But of a surety these two—the goddess woman, the wholly unhuman shape of metal, of jeweled fires and conscious force—understood each other.

For she turned, stood aside—and the body of Ventnor quivered, arose from the floor, stood upright and with closed eyes, head dropping upon one shoulder, glided toward the Disk like a dead man carried by those messengers never seen by man who, the Arabs believe, bear the death drugged souls before Allah for their awakening.

Ruth moaned and hid her eyes; Drake reached down, gathered her up in his arms, held her close.

Ventnor's body stood before the Disk, then swam up along its face. The tendrils waved out, felt of it, thrust themselves down through the wide collar of the shirt. The floating form passed higher, over the edge of the Disk; lay high beside the right star point of the rayed shape to which Ruth had been passing when Ventnor's shot brought the tragedy upon us. I saw other tentacles whip forth, examine, caress.

Then down the body swung, was borne through air, laid gently at our feet.

“He is not—dead,” it was Norhala beside me; she lifted Ruth's face from Drake's breast. “He will not die. It may be he will walk again. They can not help,” there was a shadow of apology in her tones. “They did not know. They thought it was the”—she hesitated as though at loss for words—“the—the Fire Play.”

“The Fire Play?” I gasped.

“Yes,” she nodded. “You shall see it. And now I will take him to my house. You are safe—now, nor need you trouble. For he has given you to me.”

“Who has given us to you—Norhala?” I asked, as calmly as I could.

“He”—she nodded to the Disk, then spoke the phrase that was both ancient Assyria's and ancient Persia's title for their all-conquering rulers, and that meant—“the King of Kings. The Great King, Master of Life and Death.”

She took Ruth from Drake's arms, pointing to Ventnor.

“Bear him,” she commanded, and led the way back through the walls of light.

As we lifted the body, I slipped my hand through the shirt, felt at the heart. Faint was the pulsation and slow, but regular.

Close to the encircling vapors I cast one look behind me. The shapes stood immobile, flashing disks, gigantic radiant stars and the six great spheres beneath their geometric super-Euclidean god or shrine or machine of interwoven threads of luminous force and metal—still motionless, still watching.

We emerged into the place of pillars. There stood the hooded pony and its patience, its uncomplaining acceptance of its place as servant to man brought a lump into my throat, salved, I suppose, my human vanity, abased as it had been by the colossal indifference of those things to which we were but playthings.

Again Norhala sent forth her call. Out of the maze glided her quintette of familiars; again the four clicked into one. Upon its top we lifted, Drake ascending first, the pony; then the body of Ventnor.

I saw Norhala lead Ruth to the remaining cube; saw the girl break away from her, leap beside me, and kneeling at her brother's head, cradle it against her soft breast. Then as I found in the medicine case the hypodermic needle and the strychnine for which I had been searching, I began my examination of Ventnor.

The cubes quivered—swept away through the forest of columns.

We crouched, the three of us, blind to anything that lay about us, heedless of whatever road of wonders we were on, striving to strengthen in Ventnor the spark of life so near extinction.

CHAPTER XII. “I WILL GIVE YOU PEACE”

In our concentration upon Ventnor none of us had given thought to the passing of time, nor where we were going. We stripped him to the waist, and while Ruth massaged head and neck, Drake's strong fingers kneaded chest and abdomen. I had used to the utmost my somewhat limited medical knowledge.

We had found no mark nor burn upon him, not even upon his hands over which had run the licking flame. The slightly purplish, cyanotic tinge of his skin had given way to a clear pallor; the skin was itself disquietingly cold, the blood-pressure only slightly subnormal. The pulse was more rapid, stronger; the breathing faint but regular, and with no laboring. The pupils of his eyes were contracted almost to the point of invisibility.

I could get no nervous reactions whatever. I am familiar with the effects of electric shock and know what to do in such cases, but Ventnor's symptoms, while similar in part, presented other features unknown to me and most puzzling. There was a passive automatism, a perplexing muscular rigidity which caused arms and legs, hands and head to remain, doll-like, in any position placed.

Several times during my labors I had been aware of Norhala gazing down upon us; but she made no effort to help, nor did she speak.

Now, my strained attention relaxing, I began to receive and note impressions from without. There was a different feeling in the air, a diminution of the magnetic tension; I smelled the blessed breath of trees and water.

The light about us was clear and pearly, about the intensity of the moon at full. Looking back along the way we had been traveling, I saw a half mile away vertical, knife-sharp edges of two facing cliffs, the gap between them a mile or more wide.

Through them we must have passed, for beyond them were the radiant mists of the pit of the city, and through this precipitous gateway filtered the enveloping luminosity. On each side of us uprose gradually converging and perpendicular scarps along whose base huddled a sparse foliage.

There came a low whistle of astonishment from Drake; I turned. We were slowly gliding toward something that looked like nothing so much as a huge and shimmering bubble of mingled sapphire and turquoise, swimming up from and two-thirds above and the balance still hidden within earth. It seemed to draw to itself the light, sending it back with gleamings of the gray-blue of the star sapphire, with pellucid azures and lazulis like clouded jades, with glistening peacock iridescences and tender, milky greens of tropic shallows.

Little turrets globular and topaz, yellow and pierced with tiny hexagonal openings clustered about it like baby bubbles just nestling down to rest.

Great trees shadowed it, unfamiliar trees among whose glossy leaves blossomed in wreaths flowers pink and white as apple-blossoms. From their graceful branches strange fruits, golden and scarlet and pear-shaped, hung pendulous.

It was an elfin palace; a goblin dwelling; such a bower as some mirthful, beauty-loving Jinn King of Jewels might have built from enchanted hoards for some well-beloved daughter of earth.

All of fifty feet in height was the blue globe, and up to a wide and ovaled entrance ran a broad and shining roadway. Along this the cubes swept and stopped.

“My house,” murmured Norhala.

The attraction that had held us to the surface of the blocks relaxed, angled through changed and assisting lines of force; the hosts of minute eyes sparkling quizzically, interestedly, at us, we gently slid Ventnor's body; lifted down the pony.

“Enter,” sighed Norhala, and waved a welcoming hand.

“Tell her to wait a minute,” ordered Drake.

He slipped the bandage from off the pony's head, threw off the saddlebags, and led it to the side of the roadway where thick, lush grass was growing, spangled with flowerets. There he hobbled it and rejoined us. Together we picked up Ventnor and passed slowly through the portal.

We stood in a shadowed chamber. The light that filled it was translucent, and oddly enough with little of the bluish quality I had expected. Crystalline it was; the shadows crystalline, too, rigid—like

the facets of great crystals. And as my eyes accustomed themselves I saw that what I had thought shadows actually were none.

They were slices of semitransparent stone like pale moonstones, springing from the curving walls and the high dome, and bisecting and intersecting the chamber. They were pierced with oval doorways over which fell glimmering metallic curtains—silk of silver and gold.

I glimpsed a pile of this silken stuff near by, and as we laid our burden upon it Ruth caught my arm with a little frightened cry.

Through a curtained oval sidled a figure.

Black and tall, its long and gnarled arms swung apelike; its shoulders were distorted, one so much longer than the other that the hand upon that side hung far below the knee.

It walked with a curious, crablike motion. Upon its face were stamped countless wrinkles and its blackness seemed less that of pigmentation than the weathering of unbelievable years, the very stain of ancientness. And about neither face nor figure was there anything to show whether it was man or woman.

From the twisted shoulders a short and sleeveless red tunic fell. Incredibly old the creature was—and by its corded muscles, its sinewy tendons, as incredibly powerful. It raised within me a half sick revulsion, loathing. But the eyes were not ancient, no. Irisless, lashless, black and brilliant, they blazed out of the face's carven web of wrinkles, intent upon Norhala and filled with a flame of worship.

It threw itself at her feet, prostrate, the inordinately long arms outstretched.

“Mistress!” it whined in a high and curiously unpleasant falsetto. “Great lady! Goddess!”

She stretched out a sandaled foot, touched one of the black taloned hands, and at the contact I saw a shiver of ecstasy run through the lank body. “Yuruk—” she began, and paused, regarding us.

“The goddess speaks! Yuruk hears! The goddess speaks!” It was a chant of adoration.

“Yuruk. Rise. Look upon the strangers.”

The creature—and now I knew what it was—writhed, twisted, and hideously apelike crouched upon its haunches, hands knuckling the floor.

By the amazement in the unwinking eyes it was plain that not till now had the eunuch taken cognizance of us. The amazement fled, was replaced with a black fire of malignancy, of hatred—jealousy.

"Augh!" he snarled; leaped to his feet; thrust an arm toward Ruth. She gave a little cry, cowered against Drake.

"None of that!" He struck down the clutching arm.

"Yuruk!" There was a hint of anger in the bell-toned voice. "Yuruk, these belong to me. No harm must come to them. Yuruk—beware!"

"The goddess commands. Yuruk obeys." If fear quavered in the words, beneath was more than a trace of a sullenness, too, sinister enough.

"That's a nice little playmate for her new playthings," muttered Drake. "If that bird gets the least bit gay—I shoot him pronto." He gave Ruth a reassuring hug. "Cheer up, Ruth. Don't mind that thing. He's something we can handle."

Norhala waved a white hand; Yuruk sidled over to one of the curtained ovals and through it, reappearing almost instantly with a huge platter upon which were fruits, and a curdly white liquid in bowls of thick porcelain.

"Eat," she said, as the gnarled black arms placed the platter at our feet.

"Hungry?" asked Drake. Ruth shook her head violently.

"I'm going out for the saddlebags," said Drake. "We'll use our own stuff—while it lasts. I'm taking no chances on what the Yuruk lad brings—with all due respect to Norhala's good intentions."

He started for the doorway; the eunuch blocked his way.

"We have with us food of our own, Norhala," I explained. "He goes to get it."

She nodded indifferently; clapped her hands. Yuruk shrank back, and out strode Drake.

"I am weary," sighed Norhala. "The way was long. I will refresh myself—"

She stretched out a foot toward Yuruk. He knelt, unlaced the turquoise bands, drew off the sandals. Her hands sought her breast, dwelt for an instant there.

Down slipped her silken veils, clingingly, slowly, as though reluctant to unclasp her; whispering they fell from the high and tender breasts, the delicate rounded hips, and clustered about her feet in soft petalings as of some flower of pale amber foam. Out of the calyx of that flower arose the gleaming miracle of her body crowned with glowing glory of her cloudy hair.

Naked she was, yet clothed with an unearthly purity, the purity of the far-flung, serene stars, of the eternal snows upon some calm, high-flung peak, the tranquil, silver dawns of spring; protected by some spell of divinity which chilled and slew the flame of desire. A maiden Ishtar, a virginal Isis; a woman—yet with no more of woman's lure than if she had been some exquisite and breathing statue of mingled ivory and milk of pearls.

So she stood, indifferent to us who gazed upon her, withdrawn, musing, as though she had forgotten us. And that serene indifference, with its entire absence of what we term sex consciousness, revealed to me once more how great was the abyss between us and her.

Slowly she raised her arms, wound the floating tresses into a coronal. I saw Drake enter with the saddlebags; saw them drop from hands relaxing under the shock of this amazing tableau; saw his eyes widen and fill with wonder and half-awed admiration.

Now Norhala stepped out of her fallen robes and moved toward the further wall, Yuruk following. He stooped, raised an ewer of silver and began gently to pour over her shoulders its contents. Again and again he bent and filled the vessel, dipping it into a shallow basin from which came the bubbling and chuckling of a little spring. And again I marveled at the marble smoothness and fineness of her skin on which the caressing water left tiny silvery globules, gemming it. The eunuch slithered to one side, drew from a quaint chest clothes of white floss; patted her dry with them; threw over her shoulders a silken robe of blue.

Back she floated to us; hovered over Ruth, crouching with her brother's head upon her knees.

She made a motion as though to draw the girl to her; hesitated as Ruth's face set in a passion of denial. A shadow of kindness drifted

through the wide, mysterious eyes; a shadow of pity joined it as she looked curiously down on Ventnor.

“Bathe,” she murmured, and pointed to the pool. “And rest. No harm shall come to any of you here. And you—” A hand rested for a moment lightly on the girl's curly head. “When you desire it—I will again give you—peace!”

She parted the curtains, and the eunuch still following, was hidden beyond them.

CHAPTER XIII. “VOICE FROM THE VOID”

Helplessly we looked at each other. Then called forth perhaps by what she saw in Drake's eyes, perhaps by another thought, Ruth's cheeks crimsoned, her head drooped; the web of her hair hid the warm rose of her face, the frozen pallor of Ventnor's.

Abruptly, she sprang to her feet. “Walter! Dick! Something's happening to Martin!”

Before she had ceased we were beside her; bending over Ventnor. His mouth was opening, slowly, slowly—with an effort agonizing to watch. Then his voice came through lips that scarcely moved; faint, faint as though it floated from infinite distances, a ghost of a voice whispering with phantom breath out of a dead throat.

“Hard—hard! So hard!” the whispering complained. “Don't know how long I can keep connection—with voice.

“Was fool to shoot. Sorry—might have gotten you in worse trouble—but crazy with fear for Ruth—thought, too, might be worth chance. Sorry—not my usual line—”

The thin thread of sound ceased. I felt my eyes fill with tears; it was like Ventnor to flay himself like this for what he thought stupidity, like him to make this effort to admit his supposed fault and crave forgiveness—as like him as that mad attack upon the flaming Disk in its own temple, surrounded by its ministers, had been so bafflingly unlike his usual cool, collected self.

“Martin,” I called, bending closer, “it's nothing, old friend. No one blames you. Try to rouse yourself.”

“Dear,” it was Ruth, passionately tender, “it's me. Can you hear me?”

“Only speck of consciousness and motionless in the void,” the whisper began again. “Terribly alive, terribly alone. Seem outside space yet—still in body. Can't see, hear, feel—short-circuited from every sense—but in some strange way realize you—Ruth, Walter, Drake.

“See without seeing—here floating in darkness that is also light—black light—indescribable. In touch, too, with these—”

Again the voice trailed into silence; returned, word and phrase pouring forth disconnected, with a curious and turbulent rhythm, like rushing wave crests linked by half-seen threads of the spindrift, vocal fragments of thought swiftly assembled by some subtle faculty of the mind as they fell into a coherent, incredible message.

"Group consciousness—gigantic—operating within our sphere—operating also in spheres of vibration, energy, force—above, below one to which humanity reacts—perception, command forces known to us—but in greater degree—cognizant, manipulate unknown energies—senses known to us—unknown—can't realize them fully—impossible cover, only impinge on contact points akin to our senses, forces—even these profoundly modified by additional ones—metallic, crystalline, magnetic, electric—inorganic with every power of organic—consciousness basically same as ours—profoundly changed by differences in mechanism through which it finds expression—difference our bodies—theirs.

"Conscious, mobile—inexorable, invulnerable. Getting clearer—see more clearly—see—" the voice shrilled out in a shuddering, thin lash of despair—"No! No—oh, God—no!"

Then clearly and solemnly:

"And God said: let us make men in our image, after our likeness, and let them have dominion over all the earth, and every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth."

A silence; we bent closer, listening; the still, small voice took up the thread once more—but clearly further on. Something we had missed between that text from Genesis and what we were now hearing; something that even as he had warned us, he had not been able to articulate. The whisper broke through clearly in the middle of a sentence.

"Nor is Jehovah the God of myriads of millions who through those same centuries, and centuries upon centuries before them, found earth a garden and grave—and all these countless gods and goddesses only phantom barriers raised by man to stand between him and the eternal forces man's instinct has always warned him are ever in readiness to destroy. That do destroy him as soon as his vigilance relaxes, his resistance weakens—the eternal, ruthless law

that will annihilate humanity the instant it runs counter to that law and turns its will and strength against itself—"

A little pause; then came these singular sentences:

"Weaklings praying for miracles to make easy the path their own wills should clear. Beggars who whine for alms from dreams. Shirkers each struggling to place upon his god the burden whose carrying and whose carrying alone can give him strength to walk free and unafraid, himself godlike among the stars."

And now distinctly, unfalteringly, the voice went on:

"Dominion over all the earth? Yes—as long as man is fit to rule; no longer. Science has warned us. Where was the mammal when the giant reptiles reigned? Slinking hidden and afraid in the dark and secret places. Yet man sprang from these skulking beasts.

"For how long a time in the history of earth has man been master of it? For a breath—for a cloud's passing. And will remain master only until something grown stronger wrests mastery from him—even as he wrested it from his ravening kind—as they took it from the reptiles—as did the reptiles from the giant saurians—which snatched it from the nightmare rulers of the Triassic—and so down to whatever held sway in the murk of earth dawn.

"Life! Life! Life! Life everywhere struggling for completion!

"Life crowding other life aside, battling for its moment of supremacy, gaining it, holding it for one rise and fall of the wings of time beating through eternity—and then—hurled down, trampled under the feet of another straining life whose hour has struck.

"Life crowding outside every barred threshold in a million circling worlds, yes, in a million rushing universes; pressing against the doors, bursting them down, overwhelming, forcing out those dwellers who had thought themselves so secure.

"And these—these—" the voice suddenly dropped, became thickly, vibrantly resonant, "over the Threshold, within the House of Man—nor does he even dream that his doors are down. These—Things of metal whose brains are thinking crystals—Things that suck their strength from the sun and whose blood is the lightning.

"The sun! The sun!" he cried. "There lies their weakness!"

The voice rose in pitch, grew strident.

“Go back to the city! Go back to the city! Walter—Drake. They are not invulnerable. No! The sun—strike them through the sun! Go into the city—not invulnerable—the Keeper of the Cones—strike at the Cones when—the Keeper of the Cones—ah-h-h-ah—”

We shrank back appalled, for from the parted, scarcely moving lips in the unchanging face a gust of laughter, mad, mocking, terrifying, racked its way.

“Vulnerable—under the law—even as we! The Cones!

“Go!” he gasped. A tremor shook him; slowly the mouth closed.

“Martin! Brother,” wept Ruth. I thrust my hand into his breast; felt the heart beating, with a curious suggestion of stubborn, unshakable strength, as though every vital force had concentrated there as in a beleaguered citadel.

But Ventnor himself, the consciousness that was Ventnor was gone; had withdrawn into that subjective void in which he had said he floated—a lonely sentient atom, his one line of communication with us cut; severed from us as completely as though he were, as he had described it, outside space.

And Drake and I looked at each other's eyes, neither daring to be first to break the silence of which the muffled sobbing of the girl seemed to be the sorrowful soul.

CHAPTER XIV. “FREE! BUT A MONSTER!”

The peculiar ability of the human mind to slip so readily into the refuge of the commonplace after, or even during, some well-nigh intolerable crisis, has been to me long one of the most interesting phenomena of our psychology.

It is instinctively a protective habit, of course, acquired through precisely the same causes that had given to animals their protective coloration—the stripes, say, of the zebra and tiger that blend so cunningly with the barred and speckled shadowings of bush and jungle, the twig and leaflike shapes and hues of certain insects; in fact, all that natural camouflage which was the basis of the art of concealment so astonishingly developed in the late war.

Like the animals of the wild, the mind of man moves through a jungle—the jungle of life, passing along paths beaten out by the thought of his countless forefathers in their progress from birth to death.

And these paths are bordered and screened, figuratively and literally, with bush and trees of his own selection, setting out and cultivation—shelters of the familiar, the habitual, the customary.

On these ancestral paths, within these barriers of usage, man moves hidden and secure as the animals in their haunts—or so he thinks.

Outside them lie the wildernesses and the gardens of the unknown, and man's little trails are but rabbit-runs in an illimitable forest.

But they are home to him!

Therefore it is that he scurries from some open place of revelation, some storm of emotion, some strength-testing struggle, back into the shelter of the obvious; finding it an intellectual environment that demands no slightest expenditure of mental energy or initiative, strength to sally forth again into the unfamiliar.

I crave pardon for this digression. I set it down because now I remember how, when Drake at last broke the silence that had closed in upon the passing of that still, small voice the essence of these thoughts occurred to me.

He strode over to the weeping girl, and in his voice was a roughness that angered me until I realized his purpose.

"Get up, Ruth," he ordered. "He came back once and he'll come back again. Now let him be and help us get a meal together. I'm hungry."

She looked up at him, incredulously, indignation rising.

"Eat!" she exclaimed. "You can be hungry?"

"You bet I can—and I am," he answered cheerfully. "Come on; we've got to make the best of it."

"Ruth," I broke in gently, "we'll all have to think about ourselves a little if we're to be of any use to him. You must eat—and then rest."

"No use crying in the milk even if it's spilt," observed Drake, even more cheerfully brutal. "I learned that at the front where we got so we'd yelp for food even when the lads who'd been bringing it were all mixed up in it."

She lifted Ventnor's head from her lap, rested it on the silks; arose, eyes wrathful, her little hands closed in fists as though to strike him.

"Oh—you brute!" she whispered. "And I thought—I thought—Oh, I hate you!"

"That's better," said Dick. "Go ahead and hit me if you want. The madder you get the better you'll feel."

For a moment I thought she was going to take him at his word; then her anger fled.

"Thanks—Dick," she said quietly.

And while I sat studying Ventnor, they put together a meal from the stores, brewed tea over the spirit-lamp with water from the bubbling spring. In these commonplaces I knew that she at least was finding relief from that strain of the abnormal under which we had labored so long. To my surprise I found that I was hungry, and with deep relief I watched Ruth partake of food and drink even though lightly.

About her seemed to hover something of the ethereal, elusive, and disquieting. Was it the strangely pellucid light that gave the effect, I wondered; and knew it was not, for as I scanned her covertly, there fell upon her face that shadow of inhuman tranquillity, of unearthly

withdrawal which, I guessed, had more than anything else maddened Ventnor into his attack upon the Disk.

I watched her fight against it, drive it back. White lipped, she raised her head and met my gaze. And in her eyes I read both terror and—shame.

It came to me that painful as it might be for her the time for questioning had come.

"Ruth," I said, "I know it's not necessary to remind you that we're in a tight place. Every fact and every scrap of knowledge that we can lay hold of is of the utmost importance in enabling us to determine our course.

"I'm going to repeat your brother's question—what did Norhala do to you? And what happened when you were floating before the Disk?"

The blaze of interest in Drake's eyes at these questions changed to amazement at her stricken recoil from them.

"There was nothing," she whispered—then defiantly—"nothing. I don't know what you mean."

"Ruth!" I spoke sharply now, in my own perplexity. "You do know. You must tell us—for his sake." I pointed toward Ventnor.

She drew a long breath.

"You're right—of course," she said unsteadily. "Only I—I thought maybe I could fight it out myself. But you'll have to know it—there's a taint upon me."

I caught in Drake's swift glance the echo of my own thrill of apprehension for her sanity.

"Yes," she said, now quietly. "Some new and alien thing within my heart, my brain, my soul. It came to me from Norhala when we rode the flying block, and—he—sealed upon me when I was in—his"—again she crimsoned, "embrace."

And as we gazed at her, incredulously:

"A thing that urges me to forget you two—and Martin—and all the world I've known. That tries to pull me from you—from all—to drift untroubled in some vast calm filled with an ordered ecstasy of peace. And whose calling I want, God help me, oh, so desperately to heed!

“It whispered to me first,” she said, “from Norhala—when she put her arm around me. It whispered and then seemed to float from her and cover me like—like a veil, and from head to foot. It was a quietness and peace that held within it a happiness at one and the same time utterly tranquil and utterly free.

“I seemed to be at the doorway to unknown ecstasies—and the life I had known only a dream—and you, all of you—even Martin, dreams within a dream. You weren't—real—and you did not—matter.”

“Hypnotism,” muttered Drake, as she paused.

“No.” She shook her head. “No—more than that. The wonder of it grew—and grew. I thrilled with it. I remember nothing of that ride, saw nothing—except that once through the peace enfolding me pierced warning that Martin was in peril, and I broke through to see him clutching Norhala and to see floating up in her eyes death for him.

“And I saved him—and again forgot. Then, when I saw that beautiful, flaming Shape—I felt no terror, no fear—only a tremendous—joyous—anticipation, as though—as though—” She faltered, hung her head, then leaving that sentence unfinished, whispered: “and when—it—lifted me it was as though I had come at last out of some endless black ocean of despair into the full sun of paradise.”

“Ruth!” cried Drake, and at the pain in his cry she winced.

“Wait,” she said, and held up a little, tremulous hand. “You asked—and now you must listen.”

She was silent; and when once more she spoke her voice was low, curiously rhythmic; her eyes rapt:

“I was free—free from every human fetter of fear or sorrow or love or hate; free even of hope—for what was there to hope for when everything desirable was mine? And I was elemental; one with the eternal things yet fully conscious that I was—I.

“It was as though I were the shining shadow of a star afloat upon the breast of some still and hidden woodland pool; as though I were a little wind dancing among the mountain tops; a mist whirling down a quiet glen; a shimmering lance of the aurora pulsing in the high solitudes.

“And there was music—strange and wondrous music and terrible, but not terrible to me—who was part of it. Vast chords and singing themes that rang like clusters of little swinging stars and harmonies that were like the very voice of infinite law resolving within itself all discords. And all—all—passionless, yet—rapturous.

“Out of the Thing that held me, out from its fires pulsed vitality—a flood of inhuman energy in which I was bathed. And it was as though this energy were—reassembling me, fitting me even closer to the elemental things, changing me fully into them.

“I felt the little tendrils touching, caressing—then came the shots. Awakening was—dreadful, a struggling back from drowning. I saw Martin—blasted. I drove the—the spell away from me, tore it away.

“And, O Walter—Dick—it hurt—it hurt—and for a breath before I ran to him it was like—like coming from a world in which there was no disorder, no sorrow, no doubts, a rhythmic, harmonious world of light and music, into—into a world that was like a black and dirty kitchen.

“And it's there,” her voice rose, hysterically. “It's still within me—whispering, whispering; urging me away from you, from Martin, from every human thing; bidding me give myself up, surrender my humanity.

“Its seal,” she sobbed. “No—HIS seal! An alien consciousness sealed within me, that tries to make the human me a slave—that waits to overcome my will—and if I surrender gives me freedom, an incredible freedom—but makes me, being still human, a—monster.”

She hid her face in her hands, quivering.

“If I could sleep,” she wailed. “But I'm afraid to sleep. I think I shall never sleep again. For sleeping how do I know what I may be when I wake?”

I caught Drake's eye; he nodded. I slipped my hand down into the medicine-case, brought forth a certain potent and tasteless combination of drugs which I carry upon explorations.

I dropped a little into her cup, then held it to her lips. Like a child, unthinking, she obeyed and drank.

“But I'll not surrender.” Her eyes were tragic. “Never think it! I can win—don't you know I can?”

“Win?” Drake dropped down beside her, drew her toward him. “Bravest girl I've known—of course you'll win. And remember this—nine-tenths of what you're thinking now is purely over-wrought nerves and weariness. You'll win—and we'll win, never doubt it.”

“I don't,” she said. “I know it—oh, it will be hard—but I will—I will—”

CHAPTER XV. THE HOUSE OF NORHALA

Her eyes closed, her body relaxed; the potion had done its work quickly. We laid her beside Ventnor on the pile of silken stuffs, covered them both with a fold, then looked at each other long and silently—and I wondered whether my face was as grim and drawn as his.

"It appears," he said at last, curtly, "that it's up to you and me for powwow quick. I hope you're not sleepy."

"I am not," I answered as curtly; the edge of nerves in his manner of questioning doing nothing to soothe my own, "and even if I were I would hardly expect to put all the burden of the present problem upon you by going to sleep."

"For God's sake don't be a prima donna," he flared up. "I meant no offense."

"I'm sorry, Dick," I said. "We're both a little jumpy, I guess." He nodded; gripped my hand.

"It wouldn't be so bad," he muttered, "if all four of us were all right. But Ventnor's down and out, and God alone knows for how long. And Ruth—has all the trouble we have and some special ones of her own. I've an idea"—he hesitated—"an idea that there was no exaggeration in that story she told—an idea that if anything she underplayed it."

"I, too," I replied somberly. "And to me it is the most hideous phase of this whole situation—and for reasons not all connected with Ruth," I added.

"Hideous!" he repeated. "Unthinkable—yet all this is unthinkable. And still—it is! And Ventnor—coming back—that way. Like a lost soul finding voice.

"Was it raving, Goodwin? Or could he have been—how was it he put it—in touch with these Things and their purpose? Was that message—truth?"

"Ask yourself that question," I said. "Man—you know it was truth. Had not inklings of it come to you even before he spoke? They had to me. His message was but an interpretation, a synthesis of facts I, for one, lacked the courage to admit."

“I, too,” he nodded. “But he went further than that. What did he mean by the Keeper of the Cones—and that the Things—were vulnerable under the same law that orders us? And why did he command us to go back to the city? How could he know—how could he?”

“There's nothing inexplicable in that, at any rate,” I answered. “Abnormal sensitivity of perception due to the cutting off of all sensual impressions. There's nothing uncommon in that. You have its most familiar form in the sensitivity of the blind. You've watched the same thing at work in certain forms of hypnotic experimentation, haven't you?

“Through the operation of entirely understandable causes the mind gains the power to react to vibrations that normally pass unperceived; is able to project itself through this keying up of perception into a wider area of consciousness than the normal. Just as in certain diseases of the ear the sufferer, though deaf to sounds within the average range of hearing, is fully aware of sound vibrations far above and far below those the healthy ear registers.”

“I know,” he said. “I don't need to be convinced. But we accept these things in theory—and when we get up against them for ourselves we doubt.

“How many people are there in Christendom, do you think, who believe that the Saviour ascended from the dead, but who if they saw it today would insist upon medical inspection, doctor's certificates, a clinic, and even after that render a Scotch verdict? I'm not speaking irreverently—I'm just stating a fact.”

Suddenly he moved away from me, strode over to the curtained oval through which Norhala had gone.

“Dick,” I cried, following him hastily, “where are you going? What are you going to do?”

“I'm going after Norhala,” he answered. “I'm going to have a showdown with her or know the reason why.”

“Drake,” I cried again, aghast, “don't make the mistake Ventnor did. That's not the way to win through. Don't—I beg you, don't.”

“You're wrong,” he answered stubbornly. “I'm going to get her. She's got to talk.”

He thrust out a hand to the curtains. Before he could touch them, they were parted. Out from between them slithered the black eunuch. He stood motionless, regarding us; in the ink-black eyes a red flame of hatred. I pushed myself between him and Drake.

"Where is your mistress, Yuruk?" I asked.

"The goddess has gone," he replied sullenly.

"Gone?" I said suspiciously, for certainly Norhala had not passed us. "Where?"

"Who shall question the goddess?" he asked. "She comes and she goes as she pleases."

I translated this for Drake.

"He's got to show me," he said. "Don't think I'm going to spill any beans, Goodwin. But I want to talk to her. I think I'm right, honestly I do."

After all, I reflected, there was much in his determination to recommend it. It was the obvious thing to do—unless we admitted that Norhala was superhuman; and that I would not admit. In command of forces we did not yet know, en rapport with these People of Metal, sealed with that alien consciousness Ruth had described—all these, yes. But still a woman—of that I was certain. And surely Drake could be trusted not to repeat Ventnor's error.

"Yuruk," I said, "we think you lie. We would speak to your mistress. Take us to her."

"I have told you that the goddess is not here," he said. "If you do not believe it is nothing to me. I cannot take you to her for I do not know where she is. Is it your wish that I take you through her house?"

"It is," I said.

"The goddess has commanded me to serve you in all things." He bowed, sardonically. "Follow."

Our search was short. We stepped out into what for want of better words I can describe only as a central hall. It was circular, and strewn with thick piled small rugs whose hues had been softened by the alchemy of time into exquisite, shadowy echoes of color.

The walls of this hall were of the same moonstone substance that had enclosed the chamber upon whose inner threshold we were.

They whirled straight up to the dome in a crystalline, cylindrical cone. Four doorways like that in which we stood pierced them. Through each of their curtainings in turn we peered.

All were precisely similar in shape and proportions, radiating in a lunetted, curved base triangle from the middle chamber; the curvature of the enclosing globe forming back wall and roof; the translucent slicings the sides; the circle of floor of the inner hall the truncating lunette.

The first of these chambers was utterly bare. The one opposite held a half-dozen suits of the lacquered armor, as many wicked looking, short and double-edged swords and long javelins. The third I judged to be the lair of Yuruk; within it was a copper brazier, a stand of spears and a gigantic bow, a quiver full of arrows leaning beside it. The fourth room was littered with coffers great and small, of wood and of bronze, and all tightly closed.

The fifth room was beyond question Norhala's bedchamber. Upon its floor the ancient rugs were thick. A low couch of carven ivory inset with gold rested a few feet from the doorway. A dozen or more of the chests were scattered about and flowing over with silken stuffs.

Upon the back of four golden lions stood a high mirror of polished silver. And close to it, in curiously incongruous domestic array stood a stiffly marshaled row of sandals. Upon one of the chests were heaped combs and fillets of shell and gold and ivory studded with jewels blue and yellow and crimson.

To all of these we gave but a passing glance. We sought for Norhala. And of her we found no shadow. She had gone even as the black eunuch had said; flitting unseen past Ruth, perhaps, absorbed in her watch over her brother; perhaps through some hidden opening in this room of hers.

Yuruk let drop the curtains, sidled back to the first room, we after him. The two there had not moved. We drew the saddlebags close, propped ourselves against them.

The black eunuch squatted a dozen feet away, facing us, chin upon his knees, taking us in with unblinking eyes blank of any emotion. Then he began to move slowly his tremendously long arms in easy, soothing motion, the hands running along the floor upon their talons

in arcs and circles. It was curious how these hands seemed to be endowed with a volition of their own, independent of the arms upon which they swung.

And now I could see only the hands, shuttling so smoothly, so rhythmically back and forth—weaving so sleepily, so sleepily back and forth—black hands that dripped sleep—hypnotic.

Hypnotic! I sprang from the lethargy closing upon me. In one quick side glance I saw Drake's head nodding—nodding in time to the movement of the black hands. I jumped to my feet, shaking with an intensity of rage unfamiliar to me; thrust my pistol into the wrinkled face.

"Damn you!" I cried. "Stop that. Stop it and turn your back."

The corded muscles of the arms contracted, the claws of the slithering paws drew in as though he were about to clutch me; the ebon pools of eyes were covered with a frozen film of hate.

He could not have known what was this tube with which I menaced him, but its threat he certainly sensed and was afraid to meet. He squattered about, wrapped his arms around his knees, crouched with back toward us.

"What's the matter?" asked Drake drowsily.

"He tried to hypnotize us," I answered shortly. "And pretty nearly did."

"So that's what it was." He was now wide awake. "I watched those hands of his and got sleepier and sleepier—I guess we'd better tie Mr. Yuruk up." He jumped to his feet.

"No," I said, restraining him. "No. He's safe enough as long as we're on the alert. I don't want to use any force on him yet. Wait until we know we can get something worth while by doing it."

"All right," he nodded, grimly. "But when the time comes I'm telling you straight, Doc, I'm going the limit. There's something about that human spider that makes me itch to squash him—slowly."

"I'll have no compunction—when it's worth while," I answered as grimly.

We sank down again against the saddlebags; Drake brought out a black pipe, looked at it sorrowfully; at me appealingly.

“All mine was on that pony that bolted,” I answered his wistfulness.

“All mine was on my beast, too,” he sighed. “And I lost my pouch in that spurt from the ruins.”

He sighed again, clamped white teeth down upon the stem.

“Of course,” he said at last, “if Ventnor was right in that—that disembodied analysis of his, it's rather—well, terrifying, isn't it?”

“It's all of that,” I replied, “and considerably more.”

“Metal, he said,” Drake mused. “Things of metal with brains of thinking crystal and their blood the lightnings. You accept that?”

“So far as my own observation has gone—yes,” I said. “Metallic yet mobile. Inorganic but with all the quantities we have hitherto thought only those of the organic and with others added. Crystalline, of course, in structure and highly complex. Activated by magnetic-electric forces consciously exerted and as much a part of their life as brain energy and nerve currents are of our human life. Animate, moving, sentient combinations of metal and electric energy.”

He said:

“The opening of the Disk from the globe and of the two blasting stars from the pyramids show the flexibility of the outer—plate would you call it? I couldn't help thinking of the armadillo after I had time to think at all.”

“It may be”—I struggled against the conviction now strong upon me—“it may be that within that metallic shell is an organic body, something soft—animal, as there is within the horny carapace of the turtle, the nacreous valves of the oyster, the shells of the crustaceans—it may be that even their inner surface is organic—”

“No,” he interrupted, “if there is a body—as we know a body—it must be between the outer surface and the inner, for the latter is crystal, jewel hard, impenetrable.

“Goodwin—Ventnor's bullets hit fair. I saw them strike. They did not ricochet—they dropped dead. Like flies dashed up against a rock—and the Thing was no more conscious of their striking than a rock would have been of those flies.”

“Drake,” I said, “my own conviction is that these creatures are absolutely metallic, entirely inorganic—incredible, unknown forms. Let us go on that basis.”

“I think so, too,” he nodded; “but I wanted you to say it first. And yet—is it so incredible, Goodwin? What is the definition of vital intelligence—sentience?

“Haeckel's is the accepted one. Anything which can receive a stimulus, that can react to a stimulus and retains memory of a stimulus must be called an intelligent, conscious entity. The gap between what we have long called the organic and the inorganic is steadily decreasing. Do you know of the remarkable experiments of Lillie upon various metals?”

“Vaguely,” I said.

“Lillie,” he went on, “proved that under the electric current and other exciting mediums metals exhibited practically every reaction of the human nerve and muscle. It grew weary, rested, and after resting was perceptibly stronger than before; it got what was practically indigestion, and it exhibited a peculiar but unmistakable memory. Also, he found, it could acquire disease and die.

“Lillie concluded that there existed a real metallic consciousness. It was Le Bon who first proved also that metal is more sensitive than man, and that its immobility is only apparent. (Le Bon in 'Evolution of Matter,' Chapter eleven.)

“Take the block of magnetic iron that stands so gray and apparently lifeless, subject it to a magnetic current lifeless, what happens? The iron block is composed of molecules which under ordinary conditions are disposed in all possible directions indifferently. But when the current passes through there is tremendous movement in that apparently inert mass. All of the tiny particles of which it is composed turn and shift until their north poles all point more or less approximately in the direction of the magnetic force.

“When that happens the block itself becomes a magnet, filled with and surrounded by a field of magnetic energy; instinct with it. Outwardly it has not moved; actually there has been prodigious motion.”

“But it is not conscious motion,” I objected.

“Ah, but how do you know?” he asked. “If Jacques Loeb* is right, that action of the iron molecules is every bit as conscious a movement as the least and the greatest of our own. There is absolutely no difference between them.

“Your and my and its every movement is nothing but an involuntary and inevitable reaction to a certain stimulus. If he's right, then I'm a buttercup—but that's neither here nor there. Loeb—all he did was to restate destiny, one of humanity's oldest ideas, in the terms of tropisms, infusoria and light. Omar Khayyam chemically reincarnated in the Rockefeller Institute. Nevertheless those who accept his theories have to admit that there is essentially no difference between their impulses and the rush of filings toward a magnet.

“Equally nevertheless, Goodwin, the iron does meet Haeckel's three tests—it can receive a stimulus, it does react to that stimulus and it retains memory of it; for even after the current has ceased it remains changed in tensile strength, conductivity and other qualities that were modified by the passage of that current; and as time passes this memory fades. Precisely as some human experience increases wariness, caution, which keying up of qualities remains with us after the experience has passed, and fades away in the ratio of our sensitivity plus retentiveness divided by the time elapsing from the original experience—exactly as it is in the iron.”

* Professor Jacques Loeb, of the Rockefeller Institute, New York, “The Mechanistic Conception of Life.”

CHAPTER XVI. CONSCIOUS METAL!

"Granted," I acquiesced. "We now come to their means of locomotion. In its simplest terms all locomotion is progress through space against the force of gravitation. Man's walk is a series of rhythmic stumbles against this force that constantly strives to drag him down to earth's face and keep him pressed there. Gravitation is an etheric—magnetic vibration akin to the force which holds, to use your simile again, Drake, the filing against the magnet. A walk is a constant breaking of the current.

"Take a motion picture of a man walking and run it through the lantern rapidly and he seems to be flying. We have none of the awkward fallings and recoveries that are the tempo of walking as we see it.

"I take it that the movement of these Things is a conscious breaking of the gravitational current just as much as is our own movement, but by a rhythm so swift that it appears to be continuous.

"Doubtless if we could so control our sight as to admit the vibrations of light slowly enough we would see this apparently smooth motion as a series of leaps—just as we do when the motion-picture operator slows down his machine sufficiently to show us walking in a series of stumbles.

"Very well—so far, then, we have nothing in this phenomenon which the human mind cannot conceive as possible; therefore intellectually we still remain masters of the phenomena; for it is only that which human thought cannot encompass which it need fear."

"Metallic," he said, "and crystalline. And yet—why not? What are we but bags of skin filled with certain substances in solution and stretched over a supporting and mobile mechanism largely made up of lime? Out of that primeval jelly which Gregory * calls Protobion came after untold millions of years us with our skins, our nails, and our hair; came, too, the serpents with their scales, the birds with their feathers; the horny hide of the rhinoceros and the fairy wings of the butterfly; the shell of the crab, the gossamer loveliness of the moth and the shimmering wonder of the mother-of-pearl.

* J. W. Gregory, F.R.S.D.Sc., Professor of Geology,
University of Glasgow.

"Is there any greater gap between any of these and the metallic? I think not."

"Not materially," I answered. "No. But there remains—consciousness!"

"That," he said, "I cannot understand. Ventnor spoke of—how did he put it?—a group consciousness, operating in our sphere and in spheres above and below ours, with senses known and unknown. I got—glimpses—Goodwin, but I cannot understand."

"We have agreed for reasons that seem sufficient to us to call these Things metallic, Dick," I replied. "But that does not necessarily mean that they are composed of any metal that we know. Nevertheless, being metal, they must be of crystalline structure.

"As Gregory has pointed out, crystals and what we call living matter had an equal start in the first essentials of life. We cannot conceive life without giving it the attribute of some sort of consciousness. Hunger cannot be anything but conscious, and there is no other stimulus to eat but hunger.

"The crystals eat. The extraction of power from food is conscious because it is purposeful, and there can be no purpose without consciousness; similarly the power to work from such derived energy is also purposeful and therefore conscious. The crystals do both. And the crystals can transmit all these abilities to their children, just as we do. For although there would seem to be no reason why they should not continue to grow to gigantic size under favorable conditions—yet they do not. They reach a size beyond which they do not develop.

"Instead, they bud—give birth, in fact—to smaller ones, which increase until they reach the size of the preceding generation. And like the children of man and animals, these younger generations grow on precisely as their progenitors!

"Very well, then—we arrive at the conception of a metallically crystalline being, which by some explosion of the force of evolution has burst from the to us familiar and apparently inert stage into these Things that hold us. And is there any greater difference between the forms with which we are familiar and them than there is

between us and the crawling amphibian which is our remote ancestor? Or between that and the amoeba—the little swimming stomach from which it evolved? Or the amoeba and the inert jelly of the Protobion?

"As for what Ventnor calls a group consciousness I would assume that he means a communal intelligence such as that shown by the bees and the ants—that in the case of the former Maeterlinck calls the 'Spirit of the Hive.' It is shown in their groupings—just as the geometric arrangement of those groupings shows also clearly their crystalline intelligence.

"I submit that in their rapid coordination either for attack or movement or work without apparent communication having passed between the units, there is nothing more remarkable than the swarming of a hive of bees where also without apparent communication just so many waxmakers, nurses, honey-gatherers, chemists, bread-makers, and all the varied specialists of the hive go with the old queen, leaving behind sufficient number of each class for the needs of the young queen.

"All this apportionment is effected without any means of communication that we recognize. Still it is most obviously intelligent selection. For if it were haphazard all the honeymakers might leave and the hive starve, or all the chemists might go and the food for the young bees not be properly prepared—and so on and so on."

"But metal," he muttered, "and conscious. It's all very well—but where did that consciousness come from? And what is it? And where did they come from? And most of all, why haven't they overrun the world before this?

"Such development as theirs, such an evolution, presupposes aeons of time—long as it took us to drag up from the lizards. What have they been doing—why haven't they been ready to strike—if Ventnor's right—at humanity until now?"

"I don't know," I answered, helplessly. "But evolution is not the slow, plodding process that Darwin thought. There seem to be explosions—nature will create a new form almost in a night. Then comes the long ages of development and adjustment, and suddenly another new race appears.

“It might be so of these—some extraordinary conditions that shaped them. Or they might have developed through the ages in spaces within the earth—there's that incredible abyss we saw that is evidently one of their highways. Or they might have dropped here upon some fragment of a broken world, found in this valley the right conditions and developed in amazing rapidity. * They're all possible theories—take your pick.”

* Professor Svante Arrhenius's theory of propagation of life by means of minute spores carried through space. See his “Worlds in the Making.”—W.T.G.

“Something's held them back—and they're rushing to a climax,” he whispered. “Ventnor's right about that—I feel it. And what can we do?”

“Go back to their city,” I said. “Go back as he ordered. I believe he knows what he's talking about. And I believe he'll be able to help us. It wasn't just a request he made, nor even an appeal—it was a command.”

“But what can we do—just two men—against these Things?” he groaned.

“Maybe we'll find out—when we're back in the city,” I answered.

“Well,” his old reckless cheerfulness came back to him, “in every crisis of this old globe it's been up to one man to turn the trick. We're two. And at the worst we can only go down fighting a little before the rest of us. So, after all, whatEVER the hell, WHAT the hell.”

For a time we were silent.

“Well,” he said at last, “we have to go to the city in the morning.” He laughed. “Sounds as though we were living in the suburbs, somehow, doesn't it?”

“It can't be many hours before dawn,” I said. “Turn in for a while, I'll wake you when I think you've slept enough.”

“It doesn't seem fair,” he protested, but sleepily.

“I'm not sleepy,” I told him; nor was I.

But whether I was or not, I wanted to question Yuruk, uninterrupted and undisturbed.

Drake stretched himself out. When his breathing showed him fast asleep indeed, I slipped over to the black eunuch and crouched, right hand close to the butt of my automatic, facing him.

CHAPTER XVII. YURUK

"Yuruk," I whispered, "you love us as the wheat field loves the hail; we are as welcome to you as the death cord to the condemned. Lo, a door opened into a land of unpleasant dreams you thought sealed, and we came through. Answer my questions truthfully and it may be that we shall return through that door."

Interest welled up in the depths of the black eyes.

"There is a way from here," he muttered. "Nor does it pass through—Them. I can show it to you."

I had not been blind to the flash of malice, of cunning, that had shot across the wrinkled face.

"Where does that way lead?" I asked. "There were those who sought us; men clad in armor with javelins and arrows. Does your way lead to them, Yuruk?"

For a time he hesitated, the lashless lids half closed.

"Yes," he said sullenly. "The way leads to them; to their place. But will it not be safer for you there—among your kind?"

"I don't know that it will," I answered promptly. "Those who are unlike us smote those who are like us and drove them back when they would have taken and slain us. Why is it not better to remain with them than to go to our kind who would destroy us?"

"They would not," he said "If you gave them—her." He thrust a long thumb backward toward sleeping Ruth. "Cherkis would forgive much for her. And why should you not? She is only a woman."

He spat—in a way that made me want to kill him.

"Besides," he ended, "have you no arts to amuse him?"

"Cherkis?" I asked.

"Cherkis," he whined. "Is Yuruk a fool not to know that in the world without, new things have arisen since long ago we fled from Iskander into the secret valley? What have you to beguile Cherkis beyond this woman flesh? Much, I think. Go then to him—unafraid."

Cherkis? There was a familiar sound to that. Cherkis? Of course—it was the name of Xerxes, the Persian Conqueror, corrupted by time into this—Cherkis. And Iskander? Equally, of course—Alexander. Ventnor had been right.

“Yuruk,” I demanded directly, “is she whom you call goddess—Norhala—of the people of Cherkis?”

“Long ago,” he answered; “long, long ago there was trouble in their city, even in the great dwelling place of Cherkis. I fled with her who was the mother of the goddess. There were twenty of us; and we fled here—by the way which I will show you—”

He leered cunningly; I gave no sign of interest.

“She who was the mother of the goddess found favor in the sight of the ruler here,” he went on. “But after a time she grew old and ugly and withered. So he slew her—like a little mound of dust she danced and blew away after he had slain her; and also he slew others who had grown displeasing to him. He blasted me—as he was blasted—” He pointed to Ventnor.

“Then it was that, recovering, I found my crooked shoulder. The goddess was born here. She is kin to Him Who Rules! How else could she shed the lightnings? Was not the father of Iskander the god Zeus Ammon, who came to Iskander's mother in the form of a great snake? Well? At any rate the goddess was born—shedder of the lightnings even from her birth. And she is as you see her.

“Cleave to your kind! Cleave to your kind!” Suddenly he shrilled. “Better is it to be whipped by your brother than to be eaten by the tiger. Cleave to your kind. Look—I will show you the way to them.”

He sprang to his feet, clasped my wrist in one of his long hands, led me through the curtained oval into the cylindrical hall, parted the curtainings of Norhala's bedroom and pushed me within. Over the floor he slid, still holding fast to me, and pressed against the farther wall.

An ovoid slice of the gemlike material slid aside, revealing a doorway. I glimpsed a path, a trail, leading into a forest pallid green beneath the wan light. This way thrust itself like a black tongue into the boskage and vanished in the depths.

“Follow it.” He pointed. “Take those who came with you and follow it.”

The wrinkles upon his face writhed with his eagerness.

“You will go?” panted Yuruk. “You will take them and go by that path?”

“Not yet,” I answered absently. “Not yet.”

And was brought abruptly to full alertness, vigilance, by the flame of rage that filled the eyes thrust so close.

“Lead back,” I directed curtly. He slid the door into place, turned sullenly. I followed, wondering what were the sources of the bitter hatred he so plainly bore for us; the reasons for his eagerness to be rid of us despite the commands of this woman who to him at least was goddess.

And by that curious human habit of seeking for the complex when the simple answer lies close, failed to recognize that it was jealousy of us that was the root of his behavior; that he wished to be, as it would seem he had been for years, the only human thing near Norhala; failed to realize this, and with Ruth and Drake was terribly to pay for this failure.

I looked down upon the pair, sleeping soundly; upon Ventnor lost still in trance.

“Sit,” I ordered the eunuch. “And turn your back to me.”

I dropped down beside Drake, my mind wrestling with the mystery, but every sense alert for movement from the black. Glibly enough I had passed over Dick's questioning as to the consciousness of the Metal People; now I faced it knowing it to be the very crux of these incredible phenomena; admitting, too, that despite all my special pleading, about that point swirled in my own mind the thickest mists of uncertainty. That their sense of order was immensely beyond a man's was plain.

As plain was it that their knowledge of magnetic force and its manipulation were far beyond the sphere of humanity. That they had realization of beauty this palace of Norhala's proved—and no human imagination could have conceived it nor human hands have made its thought of beauty real. What were their senses through which their consciousness fed?

Nine in number had been the sapphire ovals set within the golden zone of the Disk. Clearly it came to me that these were sense organs!

But—nine senses!

And the great stars—how many had they? And the cubes—did they open as did globe and pyramid?

Consciousness itself—after all what is it? A secretion of the brain? The cumulative expression, wholly chemical, of the multitudes of

cells that form us? The inexplicable governor of the city of the body of which these myriads of cells are the citizens—and created by them out of themselves to rule?

Is it what many call the soul? Or is it a finer form of matter, a self-realizing force, which uses the body as its vehicle just as other forces use for their vestments other machines? After all, I thought, what is this conscious self of ours, the ego, but a spark of realization running continuously along the path of time within the mechanism we call the brain; making contact along that path as the electric spark at the end of a wire?

Is there a sea of this conscious force which laps the shores of the farthest-flung stars; that finds expression in everything—man and rock, metal and flower, jewel and cloud? Limited in its expression only by the limitations of that which animates, and in essence the same in all. If so, then this problem of the life of the Metal People ceased to be a problem; was answered!

So thinking I became aware of increasing light; strode past Yuruk to the door and peeped out. Dawn was paling the sky. I stooped over Drake, shook him. On the instant he was awake, alert.

“I only need a little sleep, Dick,” I said. “When the sun is well up, call me.”

“Why, it's dawn,” he whispered. “Goodwin, you ought not to have let me sleep so long. I feel like a damned pig.”

“Never mind,” I said. “But watch the eunuch closely.”

I rolled myself up in his warm blanket; sank almost instantly into dreamless slumber.

CHAPTER XVIII. INTO THE PIT

High was the sun when I awakened; or so, I supposed, opening my eyes upon a flood of daylight. As I lay, lazily, recollection rushed upon me.

It was no sky into which I was gazing; it was the dome of Norhala's elfin home. And Drake had not aroused me. Why? And how long had I slept?

I jumped to my feet, stared about. Ruth nor Drake nor the black eunuch was there!

"Ruth!" I shouted. "Drake!"

There was no answer. I ran to the doorway. Peering up into the white vault of the heavens I set the time of day as close to seven; I had slept then three hours, more or less. Yet short as that time of slumber had been, I felt marvelously refreshed, reenergized; the effect, I was certain, of the extraordinarily tonic qualities of the atmosphere of this place. But where were the others? Where Yuruk?

I heard Ruth's laughter. Some hundred yards to the left, half hidden by a screen of flowering shrubs, I saw a small meadow. Within it a half-dozen little white goats nuzzled around her and Dick. She was milking one of them.

Reassured, I drew back into the chamber, knelt over Ventnor. His condition was unchanged. My gaze fell upon the pool that had been Norhala's bath. Longingly I looked at it; then satisfying myself that the milking process was not finished, slipped off my clothes and splashed about.

I had just time to get back in my clothes when through the doorway came the pair, each carrying a porcelain pannikin full of milk.

There was no shadow of fear or horror on her face. It was the old Ruth who stood before me; nor was there effort in the smile she gave me. She had been washed clean in the waters of sleep.

"Don't worry, Walter," she said. "I know what you're thinking. But I'm—ME again."

“Where is Yuruk?” I turned to Drake bruskly to smother the sob of sheer happiness I felt rising in my throat; and at his wink and warning grimace abruptly forebore to press the question.

“You men pick out the things and I'll get breakfast ready,” said Ruth.

Drake picked up the teakettle and motioned me before him.

“About Yuruk,” he whispered when he had gotten outside. “I gave him a little object lesson. Persuaded him to go down the line a bit, showed him my pistol, and then picked off one of Norhala's goats with it. Hated to do it, but I knew it would be good for his soul.

“He gave one screech and fell on his face and groveled. Thought it was a lightning bolt, I figure; decided I had been stealing Norhala's stuff. 'Yuruk,' I told him, 'that's what you'll get, and worse, if you lay a finger on that girl inside there.'”

“And then what happened?” I asked.

“He beat it back there.” He grinned, pointing toward the forest through which ran the path the eunuch had shown me. “Probably hiding back of a tree.”

As we filled the container at the outer spring, I told him of the revelations and the offer Yuruk had made to me.

“Whew-w!” he whistled. “In the nutcracker, eh? Trouble behind us and trouble in front of us.”

“When do we start?” he asked, as we turned back.

“Right after we've eaten,” I answered. “There's no use putting it off. How do you feel about it?”

“Frankly, like the chief guest at a lynching party,” he said. “Curious but none too cheerful.”

Nor was I. I was filled with a fever of scientific curiosity. But I was not cheerful—no!

We ministered to Ventnor as well as we could; forcing open his set jaws, thrusting a thin rubber tube down past his windpipe into his gullet and dropping through it a few ounces of the goat milk. Our own breakfasting was silent enough.

We could not take Ruth with us upon our journey; that was certain; she must stay here with her brother. She would be safer in Norhala's home than where we were going, of course, and yet to

leave her was most distressing. After all, I wondered, was there any need of both of us taking the journey; would not one do just as well?

Drake could stay—

"No use of putting all our eggs in one basket," I broached the subject. "I'll go down by myself while you stay and help Ruth. You can always follow if I don't turn up in a reasonable time."

His indignation at this proposal was matched only by her own.

"You'll go with him, Dick Drake," she cried, "or I'll never look at or speak to you again!"

"Good Lord! Did you think for a minute I wouldn't?" Pain and wrath struggled on his face. "We go together or neither of us goes. Ruth will be all right here, Goodwin. The only thing she has any cause to fear is Yuruk—and he's had his lesson.

"Besides, she'll have the rifles and her pistols, and she knows how to use them. What d'ye mean by making such a proposition as that?" His indignation burst all bounds.

Lamely I tried to justify myself.

"I'll be all right," said Ruth. "I'm not afraid of Yuruk. And none of these Things will hurt me—not after—not after—" Her eyes fell, her lips quivered, then she faced us steadily. "Don't ask me how I know that," she said quietly. "Believe me, I do know it. I am closer to—them than you two are. And if I choose I can call upon that alien strength their master gave me. It is for you two that I fear."

"No fear for us," Drake burst out hastily. "We're Norhala's little playthings. We're tabu. Take it from me, Ruth, I'd bet my head there isn't one of these Things, great or small, and no matter how many, that doesn't by this time know all about us.

"We'll probably be received with demonstrations of interest by the populace as welcome guests. Probably we'll find a sign—'Welcome to our City'—hung up over the front gate."

She smiled, a trifle tremulously.

"We'll come back," he said. Suddenly he leaned forward, put his hands on her shoulders. "Do you think there is anything that could keep me from coming back?" he whispered.

She trembled, wide eyes searching deep into his.

“Well,” I broke in, a bit uncomfortably, “we'd better be starting. I think as Drake does, that we're tabu. Barring accident there's no danger. And if I guess right about these Things, accident is impossible.”

“As inconceivable as the multiplication table going wrong,” he laughed, straightening.

And so we made ready. Our rifles would be worse than useless, we knew; our pistols we decided to carry as Drake put it, “for comfort.” Canteens filled with water; a couple of emergency rations, a few instruments, including a small spectroscope, a selection from the medical kit—all these packed in a little haversack which he threw over his broad shoulders.

I pocketed my compact but exceedingly powerful field-glasses. To my poignant and everlasting regret my camera had been upon the bolting pony, and Ventnor had long been out of films for his.

We were ready for our journey.

Our path led straight away, a smooth and dark-gray road whose surface resembled cement packed under enormous pressure. It was all of fifty feet wide and now, in daylight, glistened faintly as though overlaid with some vitreous coating. It narrowed abruptly into a wedged way that stopped at the threshold of Norhala's door.

Diminishing through the distance, it stretched straight as an arrow onward and vanished between perpendicular cliffs which formed the frowning gateway through which the night before we had passed upon the coursing cubes from the pit of the city. Here, as then, a mistiness checked the gaze.

Ruth with us, we made a brief inspection of the surroundings of Norhala's house. It was set as though in the narrowest portion of an hour-glass. The precipitous walls marched inward from the gateway forming the lower half of the figure; at the back they swung apart at a wider angle.

This upper part of the hour-glass was filled with a park-like forest. It was closed, perhaps twenty miles away, by a barrier of cliffs.

How, I wondered, did the path which Yuruk had pointed out to me pierce them? Was it by pass or tunnel; and why was it the armored men had not found and followed it?

The waist between these two mountain wedges was a valley not more than a mile wide. Norhala's house stood in its center; and it was like a garden, dotted with flowering and fragrant lilies and here and there a tiny green meadow. The great globe of blue that was Norhala's dwelling seemed less to rest upon the ground than to emerge from it; as though its basic curvatures were hidden in the earth.

What was its substance I could not tell. It was as though built of the lacquer of the gems whose colors it held. And beautiful, wondrously, incredibly beautiful it was—an immense bubble of froth of molten sapphires and turquoises.

We had not time to study its beauties. A few last instructions to Ruth, and we set forth down the gray road. Hardly had we taken a few steps when there came a faint cry from her.

"Dick! Dick—come here!"

He sprang to her, caught her hands in his. For a moment, half frightened it seemed, she considered him.

"Dick," I heard her whisper. "Dick—come back safe to me!"

I saw his arms close about her, hers tighten around his neck; black hair touched the silken brown curls, their lips met, clung. I turned away.

In a little time he joined me; head down, silent, he strode along beside me, utterly dejected.

A hundred more yards and we turned. Ruth was still standing on the threshold of the house of mystery, watching us. She waved her hands, flitted in, was hidden from us. And Drake still silent, we pushed on.

The walls of the gateway were close. The sparse vegetation along the base of the cliffs had ceased; the roadway itself had merged into the smooth, bare floor of the canyon. From vertical edge to vertical edge of the rocky portal stretched a curtain of shimmering mist. As we drew nearer we saw that this was motionless, and less like vapor of water than vapor of light; it streamed in oddly fixed lines like atoms of crystals in a still solution. Drake thrust an arm within it, waved it; the mist did not move. It seemed instead to interpenetrate the arm—as though bone and flesh were spectral, without power to dislodge the shining particles from position.

We passed within it—side by side.

Instantly I knew that whatever these veils were, they were not moisture. The air we breathed was dry, electric. I was sensible of a decided stimulation, a pleasant tingling along every nerve, a gaiety almost light-headed. We could see each other quite plainly, the rocky floor on which we trod as well. Within this vapor of light there was no ghost of sound; it was utterly empty of it. I saw Drake turn to me, his mouth open in a laugh, his lips move in speech—and although he bent close to my ear, I heard nothing. He frowned, puzzled, and walked on.

Abruptly we stepped into an opening, a pocket of clear air. Our ears were filled with a high, shrill humming as unpleasantly vibrant as the shriek of a sand blast. Six feet to our right was the edge of the ledge on which we stood; beyond it was a sheer drop into space. A shaft piercing down into the void and walled with the mists.

But it was not that shaft that made us clutch each other. No! It was that through it uprose a colossal column of the cubes. It stood a hundred feet from us. Its top was another hundred feet above the level of our ledge and its length vanished in the depths.

And its head was a gigantic spinning wheel, yards in thickness, tapering at its point of contact with the cliff wall into a diameter half that of the side closest the column, gleaming with flashes of green flame and grinding with tremendous speed at the face of the rock.

Over it, attached to the cliff, was a great vizored hood of some pale yellow metal, and it was this shelter that cutting off the vaporous light like an enormous umbrella made the pocket of clarity in which we stood, the shaft up which sprang the pillar.

All along the length of that column as far as we could see the myriad tiny eyes of the Metal People shone out upon us, not twinkling mischievously, but—grotesque as this may seem, I cannot help it—wide with surprise.

Only an instant longer did the great wheel spin. I saw the screaming rock melting beneath it, dropping like lava. Then, as though it had received some message, abruptly its motion now ceased.

It tilted; looked down upon us!

I noted that its grinding surface was studded thickly with the smaller pyramids and that the tips of these were each capped with what seemed to be faceted gems gleaming with the same pale yellow radiance as the Shrine of the Cones.

The column was bending; the wheel approaching.

Drake seized me by the arm, drew me swiftly back into the mists. We were shrouded in their silences. Step by step we went on, peering for the edge of the shelf, feeling in fancy that prodigious wheeled face stealing upon us; afraid to look behind lest in looking we might step too close to the unseen verge.

Yard after yard we slowly covered. Suddenly the vapors thinned; we passed out of them—

A chaos of sound beat about us. The clanging of a million anvils; the clamor of a million forges; the crashing of a hundred years of thunder; the roarings of a thousand hurricanes. The prodigious bellowings of the Pit beating against us now as they had when we had flown down the long ramp into the depths of the Sea of Light.

Instinct with unthinkable power was that clamor; the very voice of Force. Stunned, nay BLINDED, by it, we covered ears and eyes.

As before, the clangor died, leaving in its wake a bewildered silence. Then that silence began to throb with a vast humming, and through that humming rang a murmur as that of a river of diamonds.

We opened our eyes, felt awe grip our throats as though a hand had clutched them.

Difficult, difficult almost beyond thought is it for me now to essay to draw in words the scene before us then. For although I can set down what it was we saw, I nor any man can transmute into phrases its essence, its spirit, the intangible wonder that was its synthesis—the appallingly beautiful, soul-shaking strangeness of it, its grandeur, its fantasy, and its alien terror.

The Domain of the Metal Monster—it was filled like a chalice with Its will; was the visible expression of that will.

We stood at the very rim of a wide ledge. We looked down into an immense pit, shaped into a perfect oval, thirty miles in length I judged, and half that as wide, and rimmed with colossal precipices. We were at the upper end of this deep valley and on the tip of its

axis; I mean that it stretched longitudinally before us along the line of greatest length. Five hundred feet below was the pit's floor. Gone were the clouds of light that had obscured it the night before; the air crystal clear; every detail standing out with stereoscopic sharpness.

First the eyes rested upon a broad band of fluorescent amethyst, ringing the entire rocky wall. It girdled the cliffs at a height of ten thousand feet, and from this flaming zone, as though it clutched them, fell the curtains of sparkling mist, the enigmatic, sound-slaying vapors.

But now I saw that all of these veils were not motionless like those through which we had just passed. To the northwest they were pulsing like the aurora, and like the aurora they were shot through with swift iridescences, spectrums, polychromatic gleamings. And always these were ordered, geometric—like immense and flitting prismatic crystals flying swiftly to the very edges of the veils, then darting as swiftly back.

From zone and veils the gaze leaped to the incredible City towering not two miles away from us.

Blue black, shining, sharply cut as though from polished steel, it reared full five thousand feet on high!

How great it was I could not tell, for the height of its precipitous walls barred the vision. The frowning facade turned toward us was, I estimated, five miles in length. Its colossal scarp struck the eyes like a blow; its shadow, falling upon us, checked the heart. It was overpowering—dreadful as that midnight city of Dis that Dante saw rising up from another pit.

It was a metal city, mountainous.

Featureless, smooth, the immense wall of it heaved heavenward. It should have been blind, that vast oblong face—but it was not blind. From it radiated alertness, vigilance. It seemed to gaze toward us as though every foot were manned with sentinels; guardians invisible to the eyes whose concentration of watchfulness was caught by some subtle hidden sense higher than sight.

It was a metal city, mountainous and—AWARE.

About its base were huge openings. Through and around these portals swirled hordes of the Metal People; in units and in combinations coming and going, streaming in and out, forming as

they came and went patterns about the openings like the fretted spume of great breakers surging into, retreating from, ocean-bitten gaps in some iron-bound coast.

From the immensity of the City the eyes dropped back to the Pit in which it lay. Its floor was plaquelike, a great plane smooth as though turned by potter's wheel, broken by no mound nor hillock, slope nor terrace; level, horizontal, flawlessly flat. On it was no green living thing—no tree nor bush, meadow nor covert.

It was alive with movement. A ferment that was as purposeful as it was mechanical, a ferment symmetrical, geometrical, supremely ordered—

The surging of the Metal Hordes.

There they moved beneath us, these enigmatic beings, in a countless host. They marched and countermarched in battalions, in regiments, in armies. Far to the south I glimpsed a company of colossal shapes like mobile, castellated and pyramidal mounts. They were circling, weaving about each other with incredible rapidity—like scores of great pyramids crowned with gigantic turrets and dancing. From these turrets came vivid flashes, lightning bright—on their wake the rolling echoes of faraway thunder.

Out of the north sped a squadron of obelisks from whose tops flamed and flared the immense spinning wheels, appearing at this distance like fiery whirling disks.

Up from their setting the Metal People lifted themselves in a thousand incredible shapes, shapes squared and globed and spiked and shifting swiftly into other thousands as incredible. I saw a mass of them draw themselves up into the likeness of a tent skyscraper high; hang so for an instant, then writhe into a monstrous chimera of a dozen towering legs that strode away like a gigantic headless and bodiless tarantula in steps two hundred feet long. I watched mile-long lines of them shape and reshape into circles, into interlaced lozenges and pentagons—then lift in great columns and shoot through the air in unimaginable barrage.

Through all this incessant movement I sensed plainly purpose, knew that it was definite activity toward a definite end, caught the clear suggestion of drill, of maneuver.

And when the shiftings of the Metal Hordes permitted we saw that all the flat floor of the valley was stripped and checkered, stippled and tessellated with every color, patterned with enormous lozenges and squares, rhomboids and parallelograms, pentagons and hexagons and diamonds, lunettes, circles and spirals; harlequined yet harmonious; instinct with a grotesque suggestion of a super-Futurism.

But always this patterning was ordered, always COHERENT. As though it were a page on which was spelled some untranslatable other world message.

Fourth Dimensional revelations by some Euclidean deity! Commandments traced by some mathematical God!

Looping across the vale, emerging from the sparkling folds of the southernmost curtainings and vanishing into the gleaming veils of the easternmost, ran a broad ribbon of pale-green jade; not straightly but with manifold convolutions and flourishes. It was like a sentence in Arabic.

It was margined with sapphire blue. All along its twisting course two broad bands of jet margined the cerulean shore. It was spanned by scores of flashing crystal arches. Nor were these bridges—even from that distance I knew they were no bridges. From them came the crystalline murmurings.

Jade? This stream jade? If so then it must be in truth molten, for I caught its swift and polished rushing! It was no jade. It was in truth a river; a river running like a writing across a patterned plane.

I looked upward—up to the circling peaks. They were a stupendous coronet thrusting miles deep into the dazzling sky. I raised my glasses, swept them. In color they were an immense and variegated flower with countless multiform petals of stone; in outline they were a ring of fortresses built by fantastic unknown Gods.

Up they thrust—domed and arched, spired and horned, pyramided, fanged and needled. Here were palisades of burning orange with barbicans of incandescent bronze; there aiguilles of azure rising from bastions of cinnabar red; turrets of royal purple, obelisks of indigo; titanic forts whose walls were splashed with vermilion, with citron yellows and with rust of rubies; watch towers of flaming scarlet.

Scattered among them were the flashing emeralds of the glaciers and the immense pallid baroques of the snow fields.

Like a diadem the summits ringed the Pit. Below them ran the ring of flashing amethyst with its aural mists. Between them lay the vast and patterned flat covered with still symbol and inexplicable movement. Under their summits brooded the blue black, metallic mass of the Seeing City.

Within circling walls, over plain and from the City hovered a cosmic spirit not to be understood by man. Like an emanation of stars and space, it was yet gem fine and gem hard, crystalline and metallic, lapidescent and—

Conscious!

Down from the ledge where we stood fell a steep ramp, similar to that by which, in the darkness, we had descended. It dropped at an angle of at least forty-five degrees; its surface was smooth and polished.

Through the mists at our back stole a shining block. It paused, seemed to perk itself; spun so that in turn each of its six faces took us in.

I felt myself lifted upon it by multitudes of little invisible hands; saw Drake whirling up beside me. I moved toward him—through the force that held us. A block swept away from the ledge, swayed for a moment. Under us, as though we were floating in air, the Pit lay stretched. There was a rapid readjustment, a shifting of our two selves upon another surface. I looked down upon a tremendous, slender pillar of the cubes, dropping below, five hundred feet to the valley's floor a column of which the block that held us was the top.

Gone was the whirling wheel that had crowned it, but I knew this for the Grinding Thing from which we had fled; the questing block had been its scout. As though curious to know more of us, the Shape had sought us out through the mists, its messenger had caught us, delivered us to it.

The pillar leaned over—bent like that shining pillar that had bridged for us, at Norhala's commands, the abyss. The floor of the valley arose to meet us. Further and further leaned the pillar. Again there was a rapid shifting of us to another surface of the crowning cube. Fast now swept up toward us the valley floor. A dizziness

clouded my sight. There was a little shock, a rolling over the Thing that had held us—

We stood upon the floor of the Pit.

And breaking from the immense and prostrate shaft on whose top we had ridden downward came score upon score of the cubes. They broke from it, disintegrating it; circled about us, curiously, interestedly, twinkling at us from their deep sparkling points of eyes.

Helplessly we gazed at those who circled around us. Then suddenly I felt myself lifted once more, was tossed to the surface of the nearest block. Upon it I spun while the tiny eyes searched me. Then like a human ball it tossed me to another. I caught a glimpse of Drake's tall figure drifting through the air.

The play became more rapid, breathtaking. It was play; I recognized that. But it was perilous play for us. I felt myself as fragile as a doll of glass in the hands of careless children.

I was tossed to a waiting cube. On the ground, not ten feet from me, was Drake, swaying dizzily. Suddenly the cube that held me tightened its grip; tightened it so that it drew me irresistibly flat down upon its surface. Before I dropped, Drake's body leaped toward me as though drawn by a lasso. He fell at my side.

Then pursued by scores of the Things and like some mischievous boy bearing off the spoils, the block that held us raced away, straight for an open portal. A blaze of incandescent blue flame blinded me; again as the dazzlement faded I saw Drake beside me—a skeleton form. Swiftly flesh melted back upon him, clothed him.

The cube stopped, abruptly; the hosts of little unseen hands raised us, slid us gently over its edge, set us upright beside it. And it sped away.

All about us stretched another of those vast halls in which on high burned the pale-gilt suns. Between its colossal columns streamed thousands of the Metal Folk; no longer hurriedly, but quietly, deliberately, sedately.

We were within the City—even as Ventnor had commanded.

CHAPTER XIX. THE CITY THAT WAS ALIVE

Close beside us was one of the cyclopean columns. We crept to it; crouched at its base opposite the drift of the Metal People; strove, huddled there, to regain our shaken poise. Like bagatelles we felt in that tremendous place, the weird luminaries gleaming above like garlands of frozen suns, the enigmatic hosts of animate cubes and spheres and pyramids trooping past.

They ranged in size from shapes yard-high to giants of thirty feet or more. They paid no heed to us, did not stop; streaming on, engrossed in whatever mysterious business was summoning them. And after a time their numbers lessened; thinned down to widely separate groups, to stragglers; then ceased. The hall was empty of them.

As far as the eye could reach the columned spaces stretched. I was conscious once more of that unusual flow of energy through every vein and nerve.

“Follow the crowd!” said Drake. “Do you feel just full of pep and ginger, by the way?”

“I am aware of the most extraordinary vigor,” I answered.

“Some weird joint,” he mused, looking about him. “Wonder if they have any windows? This whole place looked solid to me—what I could see of it. Wonder if we'll get up against it for air? These Things don't need it, that's sure. Wonder—”

He broke off staring fascinatedly at the pillar behind us.

“Look here, Goodwin!” There was a tremor in his voice. “What do you make of THIS?”

I followed his pointing finger; looked at him inquiringly.

“The eyes!” he said impatiently. “Don't you see them? The eyes in the column!”

And now I saw them. The pillar was a pale metallic blue, in color a trifle darker than the Metal Folk. All within it were the myriads of tiny crystalline points that we had grown to know were the receptors of some strange sense of sight. But they did not sparkle as did those others; they were dull, lifeless. I touched the surface. It was smooth, cool—with none of that subtle, warm vitality that pulsed through all

the Things with which I had come in contact. I shook my head, realizing as I did so what a shock the incredible possibility he had suggested had given me.

"No," I said. "There is a resemblance, yes. But there is no force about this—stuff; no life. Besides, such a thing is utterly incredible."

"They might be—dormant," he suggested stubbornly. "Can you see any mark of their joining—if they ARE the cubes?"

Together we scanned the pillar minutely. The faces seemed unbroken, continuous; there was no trace of those thin and shining lines that marked the juncture of the cubes when they had clicked together to form the bridge of the abyss or that had gleamed, crosslike, upon the back of the combined four upon which we had followed Norhala.

"It's a sheer impossibility. It's madness to think such a thing, Drake!" I exclaimed, and wondered at my own vehemence of denial.

"Maybe," he shook his head doubtfully. "Maybe—but—well—let's be on our way."

We strode on, following the direction the Metal Folk had gone. Clearly Drake was still doubtful; at each pillar he hesitated, scanning it closely with troubled eyes.

But I, having determinedly dismissed the idea, was more interested in the fantastic lights that flooded this columned hall with their buttercup radiance. They were still and unwinking; not disks, I could see now, but globes. Great and small, they floated motionless, their rays extending rigidly and as still as the orb that shed them.

Yet rigid as they were there was nothing about either rays or orbs that suggested either hardness or the metallic. They were vaporous, soft as St. Elmo's fire, the witch lights that cling at times to the spars of ships, weird gleaming visitors from the invisible ocean of atmospheric electricity.

When they disappeared, as they did frequently, it was instantaneously, completely, with a disconcerting sleight-of-hand finality. I noted, though, that when they did vanish, immediately close to where they had been other orbs swam forth with that same astonishing abruptness; sometimes only one, larger it might be than that which had gone; sometimes a cluster of smaller globes, their frozen, crocused rays impinging.

What could they be, I wondered—how fixed, and what the source of their light? Products of electro-magnetic currents and born of the interpenetration of such streams flowing above us? Such a theory might account for their disappearance, and reappearance, shiftings of the flows that changed the light producing points of contact. Wireless lights? If so here was an idea that human science might elaborate if ever we returned to—

"Now which way?" Drake broke in upon my musing. The hall had ended. We stood before a blank wall vanishing into the soft mists hiding the roof of the chamber.

"I thought we had been going along the way They went," I said in amazement.

"So did I," he answered. "We must have circled. They never went through THAT unless—unless—" He hesitated.

"Unless what?" I asked sharply.

"Unless it opened and let them through," he said. "Have you forgotten those great ovals—like cat's eyes that opened in the outer walls?" he added quietly.

I HAD forgotten. I looked again at the wall. Certainly it was smooth, lineless. In one unbroken, shining surface it rose, a facade of polished metal. Within it the deep set points of light were duller even than they had been in the pillars; almost indeed indistinguishable.

"Go on to the left," I said none too patiently. "And get that absurd notion out of your head."

"All right." He flushed. "But you don't think I'm afraid, do you?"

"If what you're thinking were true, you'd have a right to be," I replied tartly. "And I want to tell you I'D be afraid. Damned afraid."

For perhaps two hundred paces we skirted the base of the wall. We came abruptly to an opening, an oblong passageway fully fifty foot wide by twice as high. At its entrance the mellow, saffron light was cut off as though by an invisible screen. The tunnel itself was filled with a dim grayish blue luster. For an instant we contemplated it.

"I wouldn't care to be caught in there by any rush," I hesitated.

"There's not much good in thinking of that now," said Drake, grimly. "A few chances more or less in a joint of this kind is nothing between friends, Goodwin; take it from me. Come on."

We entered. Walls, floor and roof were composed of the same substance as the great pillars, the wall of the outer chamber; filled like them with dimmed replicas of the twinkling eye points.

"Odd that all the places in here are square," muttered Drake. "They don't seem to have used any spherical or pyramidal ideas in their building—if it is a building."

It was true. All was mathematically straight up and down and across. It was strange—still we had seen little as yet.

There was a warmth about this passageway we trod; a difference in the air of it. The warmth grew, a dry and baking heat; but stimulative rather than oppressive. I touched the walls; the warmth did not come from them. And there was no wind. Yet as we went on the heat increased.

The passageway turned at a right angle, continuing in a corridor half its former dimensions. Far away shone a high bar of pale yellow radiance, rising like a pillar of light from floor to roof. Toward it, perforce, we trudged. Its brilliancy grew greater.

A few paces away from it we stopped. The yellow luminescence streamed through a slit not more than a foot wide in the wall. We were in a cul-de-sac for the opening was not wide enough for either Drake or me to push through. Through it with the light gushed the curious heat enveloping us.

Drake walked to the opening, peered through. I joined him.

At first all that I could see was a space filled with the saffron lambency. Then I saw that this was splashed with tiny flashes of the jewel fires; little lances and javelin thrusts of burning emeralds and rubies; darting gem hard flames rose scarlet and pale sapphire; quick flares of violet.

Into my sight through the irised, crocus mist swam the radiant body of Norhala!

She stood naked, clad only in the veils of her hair that glowed now like spun silk of molten copper, her strange eyes wide and smiling, the galaxies of tiny stars sparkling through their gray depths.

And all about her swirled a countless host of the Little Things!

From them came the gem fires piercing the aureate mists. They played and frolicked about her in scores of swiftly forming, swiftly changing, goblin shapes. They circled her feet in shining, elfin rings;

then opening into flaming disks and stars, shot up and spun about the white miracle of her body in great girdles of multi-colored living fires. Mingled with disk and star were tiny crosses gleaming with sullen, deep crimsons and smoky orange.

A flash of blue incandescence and a slender pillared shape leaped from the floor; became a coronet, a whirling, flashing halo toward which streamed up the flaming tendrilings of her tresses. Other halos circled her arms and breasts; they spun like bracelets about the outstretched arms.

Then like a swiftly rushing wave a host of the Little Things thrust themselves up, covered her, hid her in a coruscating cloud.

I saw an exquisite arm thrust itself from their clinging, wave gaily; saw her glorious head emerge from the incredible, the seething draperies of living jewels. I heard her laughter, sweet and golden and far away.

Goddess of the Inexplicable! Madonna of the Metal Babes!

The Nursery of the Metal People!

Norhala was gone, blotted out from our sight! Gone too were the bar of light and the chamber into which we had been peering. We stared at a smooth, blank wall. With that same ensorcelled swiftness the wall had closed even as we had stared through it; closed so quickly that we had not seen its motion.

I gripped Drake; shrank with him into the farthest corner—for on the other side of us the wall was opening. First it was only a crack; then rapidly it widened. There stretched another passageway, luminous and long; far down it we glimpsed movement. Closer that movement came, grew plainer. Out of the mistily luminous distances, three abreast and filling the corridor from side to side, raced upon us a company of the great spheres!

Back we cowered from their approach—back and back; arms outstretched, pressing against the barrier, flattening ourselves against the shock of the destroying impact menacing.

“It's all up,” muttered Drake. “No place to run. They're bound to smash us. Stick close, Doc. Get back to Ruth. Maybe I can stop them!”

Before I could check him, he had leaped straight in the path of the rushing globes, now a scant twoscore yards away.

The globes stopped—halted a few feet from him. They seemed to contemplate us, astonished. They turned upon themselves, as though consulting. Slowly they advanced. We were pushed forward and lifted gently. Then as we hung suspended, held by that force which always I can liken only to myriads of tiny invisible hands, the shining arcs of their backs undulated beneath us.

Their files swung around the corner and marched down the passage by which we had come from the immense hall. And when the last rank had passed from under us we were dropped softly to our feet; stood swaying in their wake.

A curious frenzy of helpless indignation shook me, a rage of humiliation obscuring all gratitude I should have felt for our escape. Drake's eyes blazed wrath.

“The insolent devils!” He raised clenched fists. “The insolent, domineering devils!”

We stared after them.

Was the passage growing narrower—closing? Even as I gazed I saw it shrink; saw its walls slide silently toward each other. I pushed Drake into the newly opened way and sprang after him.

Behind us was an unbroken wall covering all that space in which but a moment before we had stood!

Is it to be wondered that a panic seized us; that we began to run crazily down the alley that still lay open before us, casting over our shoulders quick, fearful glances to see whether that inexorable, dreadful closing was continuing, threatening to crush us between these walls like flies in a vise of steel?

But they did not close. Unbroken, silent, the way stretched before us and behind us. At last, gasping, avoiding each other's gaze, we paused.

And at that very moment of pause a deeper tremor shook me, a trembling of the very foundations of life, the shuddering of one who faces the inconceivable knowing at last that the inconceivable—IS.

For, abruptly, walls and floor and roof broke forth into countless twinklings!

As though a film had been withdrawn from them, as though they had awakened from slumber, myriads of little points of light shone

forth upon us from the pale-blue surfaces—lights that considered us, measured us—mocked us.

The little points of living light that were the eyes of the Metal People!

This was no corridor cut through inert matter by mechanic art; its opening had been caused by no hidden mechanisms! It was a living Thing—walled and floored and roofed by the living bodies—of the Metal People themselves.

Its opening, as had been the closing of that other passage, was the conscious, coordinate and voluntary action of the Things that formed these mighty walls.

An action that obeyed, was directed by, the incredibly gigantic, communistic will which, like the spirit of the hive, the soul of the formicary, animated every unit of them.

A greater realization swept us. If THIS were true, then those pillars in the vast hall, its towering walls—all this City was one living Thing!

Built of the animate bodies of countless millions! Tons upon countless tons of them shaping a gigantic pile of which every atom was sentient, mobile—intelligent!

A Metal Monster!

Now I knew why it was that its frowning facade had seemed to watch us Argus-eyed as the Things had tossed us toward it. It HAD watched us!

That flood of watchfulness pulsing about us had been actual concentration of regard of untold billions of tiny eyes of the living block which formed the City's cliff.

A City that Saw! A City that was Alive!

No secret mechanism then—back darted my mind to that first terror—had closed the wall, shutting from our sight Norhala at play with the Little Things. None had opened the way for, had closed the way behind, the coursing spheres. It had been done by the conscious action of the conscious Things of whose living bodies was built this whole tremendous thinking pile!

I think that for a moment we both went a little mad as that staggering truth came to us. I know we started to run once more,

side by side, gripping like frightened children each other's hands. Then Drake stopped.

"By all the HELL of this place," he said, solemnly, "I'll run no more. After all—we're men. If they kill us, they kill us. But by the God who made me I'll run from them no more. I'll die standing."

His courage steadied me. Defiantly we marched on. Up from below us, down from the roof, out from the walls of our way the hosts of eyes gleamed and twinkled upon us.

"Who could have believed it?" he muttered, half to himself. "A living city of them! A living nest of them; a prodigious living nest of metal!"

"A nest?" I caught the word. What did it suggest? That was it—the nest of the army ants, the city of the army ants, that Beebe had studied in the South American jungles and once described to me. After all, was this more wonderful, more unbelievable than that—the city of ants which was formed by their living bodies precisely as this was of the bodies of the Cubes?

How had Beebe * phrased it—"the home, the nest, the hearth, the nursery, the bridal suite, the kitchen, the bed and board of the army ants." Built of and occupied by those blind and deaf and savage little insects which by the guidance of smell alone carried on the most intricate operations, the most complex activities. Nothing here was stranger than that, I reflected—if once one could rid the mind of the paralyzing influence of the shapes of the Metal Things. Whence came the stimuli that moved THEM, the stimuli to which THEY reacted?

* William Beebe, Atlantic Monthly, October, 1919.

Well then—whence and how came the orders to which the ANTS responded; that bade them open THIS corridor in their nest, close THAT, form this chamber, fill that one? Was one more mysterious than the other?

Breaking into my current of thoughts came consciousness that I was moving with increased speed; that my body was fast growing lighter.

Simultaneously with this recognition I felt myself lifted from the floor of the corridor and levitated with considerable rapidity

forward; looking down I saw that floor several feet below me. Drake's arm wound itself around my shoulder.

"Closing up behind us," he muttered. "They're putting us—out."

It was, indeed, as though the passageway had wearied of our deliberate progress. Had decided to—give us a lift. Rearward it was shutting. I noted with interest how accurately this motion kept pace with our own speed, and how fluidly the walls seemed to run together.

Our movement became accelerated. It was as though we floated buoyantly, weightless, upon some swift stream. The sensation was curiously pleasant, languorous—what was that word Ruth had used?—ELEMENTAL—and free. The supporting force seemed to flow equally from walls and floor; to reach down to us from the roof. It was slumberously even, and effortless. I saw that in advance of us the living corridor was opening even as behind us it was closing.

All around us the little eye points twinkled and—laughed.

There was no danger here—there could be none. Deeper and deeper dropped my mind into the depths of that alien tranquillity. Faster and faster we floated—onward.

Abruptly, ahead of us shone a blaze of daylight. We passed into it. The force holding us withdrew its grip; I felt solidity beneath my feet; stood and leaned back against a smooth wall.

The corridor had ended and—had shut us out from itself.

"Bounced!" exclaimed Drake.

And incongruous, flippant, colloquial as was that word, I know none that would better describe my own feelings.

We were BOUNCED out upon a turret jutting from the barrier. And before us lay spread the most amazing, the most extraordinary fantastic scene upon which, I think, the vision of man has rested since the advent of time.

CHAPTER XX. VAMPIRES OF THE SUN

It was a crater; a half mile on high and all of two thousand feet across ran the circular lip of its vast rim. Above it was a circle of white and glaring sky in whose center flamed the sun.

And instantly, before my vision could grasp a tithe of that panorama, I knew that this place was the very heart of the City; its vital ganglion; its soul.

Around the crater lip were poised thousands of concave disks, vernal green, enormous. They were like a border of gigantic, upthrust shields; and within each, emblazoned like a shield's device, was a blinding flower of flame—the reflected, dilated face of the sun. Below this diadem hung, pendent, clusters of other disks, swarmed like the globular hiving of the constellation Hercules' captured stars. And each of these prisoned the image of our sun.

A hundred feet below us was the crater floor.

Up from it thrust a mountainous forest of the pallidly radiant cones; bristling; prodigious. Tier upon tier, thicket upon thicket, phalanx upon phalanx they climbed. Up and up, pyramidically, they flung their spiked hosts.

They drew together two thousand feet above us, clustering close about the foot of a single huge spire which thrust itself skyward above them. The crest of this spire was truncated. From its shorn tip radiated scores of long and slender spokes holding in place a thousand feet wide wheel of wan green disks whose concave surfaces, unlike those smooth ones girding the crater, were curiously faceted.

This amazing structure rested upon a myriad-footed base of crystal, even as had that other cornute fantasy beside which we had met the great Disk. But it was in size to that as—as Leviathan to a minnow. From it streamed the same baffling suggestion of invincible force transmuted into matter; energy coalesced into the tangible; power made concentrate in the vestments of substance.

Half-way between crater lip and floor began the hordes of the Metal People.

In colossal animate cheveau-de-frise of hundred-foot girders they thrust themselves out from the curving walls—walls, I knew, as alive as they!

From these Brobdignagian beams they swung in ropes and clusters—spheres and cubes studded as thickly with the pyramids as ever Titan's mace with spikes. Group after bizarre group they dropped; pendulous. Coppices of slender columns of thistled globes sprang up to meet the festooned joists.

Between the girders they draped themselves in long, stellated garlands; grouped themselves in innumerable, kaleidoscopic patterns.

They clicked into place around the golden turret in which we crouched.

In fantastic arrases they swayed in front of us—now hiding by, now revealing through their quicksilver interweavings the mounts of the Cones.

And steadily those flowing in below added to their multitudes; gliding up cable and pillar; building out still further the living girders, stringing themselves upon living festoon and living garland, weaving in among them, changing their shapes, rewriting their symbols.

They swung and threaded swiftly, in shifting arabesque, in Gothic traceries, in lace-like fantasies; utterly bizarre, unutterably beautiful—crystalline, geometric always.

Abruptly their movement ceased—so abruptly that the stoppage of all the ordered turmoil had the quality of appalling silence.

An unimaginable tapestry bedight with incredible broidery, the Metal People draped the vast cup.

Pillared it as though it were a temple.

Garnished it with their bodies as though it were a shrine.

Across the floor toward the Cones glided a palely lustrous sphere. In shape only a globe like all its kind, yet it was invested with power; it radiated power as a star does light; was clothed in unseen garments of supernal force. In its wake drifted two great pyramids; after them ten spheres but little smaller than the Shape which led.

“The Metal Emperor!” breathed Drake.

On they swept until they reached the base of the Cones. They paused at the edge of the crystal tabling. They turned.

There was a flashing as of a meteor bursting. The globe had opened into that splendor of jewel fires before which had floated Norhala and Ruth.

I saw again the luminous ovals of sapphire, studding its golden zone, the mystic rose of pulsing, petal flame, the still core of incandescent ruby that was the heart of that rose.

Strangely I felt my own heart veer toward this—Thing; bowing before its beauty and its strength; almost worshiping!

A shock of revulsion went through me. I shot a quick, half frightened glance at Drake. He was crouching dangerously close to the lip of the ledge, hands clasped and knuckles white with the intensity of his grip, eyes rapt, staring—upon the verge of worship even as I had been.

"Drake!" I thrust my elbow into his side brutally. "None of that! Remember you're human! Guard yourself, man—guard yourself!"

"What?" he muttered; then, abruptly: "How did you know?"

"I felt it myself," I answered: "For God's sake, Dick—hold fast to yourself! Remember Ruth!"

He shook his head violently—as though to be rid of some clinging, cloying thing.

"I'll not forget again," he said.

He huddled down once more close to the edge of the shelf; peering over. No one of the Metal People had moved; the silence, the stillness, was unbroken.

Now the flanking pyramids shot forth into twin stars, blazing with violet luminescences. And one by one after them the ten lesser spheres expanded into flaming orbs; beautiful they were, but far less glorious than that Disk of whom they were the counselors?—ministers?—what?

Still there was no movement among all the arrased, girdered, pillared hosts.

There came a little wailing; far away it was and far. Nearer it drew. Was that a tremor that passed through the crowded crater? A quick pulse of—eagerness?

“Hungry!” whispered Drake. “They're HUNGRY!”

Closer was the wailing; again that faint tremor quivered over the place. And now I caught it—a quick and avid pulsing.

“Hungry,” whispered Drake again. “Like a lot of lions with the keeper coming along with meat.”

The wailing was below us. I felt, not a quiver this time, but an unmistakable shock pass through the Horde. It throbbed—and passed.

Into the field of our vision, up to the flaming Disk rushed an immense cube.

Thrice the height of a tall man—as I think I have noted before—when it unfolded its radiance was that shape of mingled beauty and power I call the Metal Emperor.

Yet this Thing eclipsed it. Black, uncompromising, in some indefinable way BRUTAL, its square bulk blotted out the Disk's effulgence; shrouded it. And a shadow seemed to fall upon the crater. The violet fires of the flanking stars pulsed out—watchfully, threateningly.

For only an instant the darkening block loomed against the Disk; blackened it.

There came another meteor burst of light. Where the cube had been was now a tremendous, fiery cross—a cross inverted.

Its upper arm arose to twice the length either of its horizontals or the square that was its foot. In its opening it must have turned, for its—FACE—was toward us and away from the Cones, its body hid the Disk, and almost all the surfaces of the two watchful Stars.

Eighty feet at least in height, this cruciform shape stood. It flamed and flickered with angry, smoky crimsons and scarlets; with sullen orange glowings and glitterings of sulphurous yellows. Within its fires were none of those leaping, multicolored glories that were the Metal Emperor's; no trace of the pulsing, mystic rose; no shadow of jubilant sapphire; no purple royal; no tender, merciful greens nor gracious opalescences. Nothing even of the blasting violet of the Stars.

All angry, smoky reds and ochres the cross blazed forth—and in its lurid glowings was something sinister, something real, something cruel, something—nearer to earth, closer to man.

"The Keeper of the Cones and the Metal Emperor!" muttered Drake. "I begin to get it—yes—I begin to get—Ventnor!"

Once more the pulse, the avid throbbing shook the crater. And as swiftly in its wake rushed back the stillness, the silence.

The Keeper turned—I saw its palely lustrous blue metallic back. I drew out my little field-glasses, focussed them.

The Cross slipped sidewise past the Disk, its courtiers, its stellated guardians. As it went by they swung about with it; ever facing it.

And now at last was clear a thing that had puzzled greatly—the mechanism of that opening process by which sphere became oval disk, pyramid a four-pointed star and—as I had glimpsed in the play of the Little Things about Norhala, could see now so plainly in the Keeper—the blocks took this inverted cruciform shape.

The Metal People were hollow!

Hollow metal—boxes!

In their enclosing sides dwelt all their vitality—their powers—themselves!

And those sides were—everything that THEY were!

Folded, the oval disk became the sphere; the four points of the star, the square from which those points radiated; shutting became the pyramid; the six faces of the cubes were when opened the inverted cross.

Nor were these flexible, mobile walls massive. They were indeed, considering the apparent mass of the Metal Folk, most astonishingly fragile. Those of the Keeper, despite its eighty feet of height, could not have been more than a yard in thickness. At the edges I thought I could see groovings; noted the same appearances at the outlines of the Stars. Seen sidewise, the body of the Metal Emperor showed as a convexity; its surface smooth, with a suggestion of transparency.

The Keeper was bending; its oblong upper plane dropping forward as though upon a hinge. Lower and lower this flange bent—in a grotesque, terrifying obeisance; a horrible mockery of reverence.

Was this mountain of Cones then actually a shrine—an idol of the Metal People—their God?

The oblong that was the upper half of the cruciform Shape extended now at right angles to the horizontal arms. It hovered, a

rectangle forty feet long, as many feet over the floor at the base of the crystal pedestal. It bent again, this time from the hinge that held the outstretched arms to the base. And now it was a huge truncated cross, a T-shaped figure, hovering only twenty feet above the pave.

Down from the Keeper writhed and flicked a tangle of tentacles; serpentine, whiplike. Silvery white, they were dyed with the scarlet and orange flaming of the surface now hidden from my eyes; reflected those sullen and angry gleamings. Vermiceous, coiling, they seemed to drop from every inch of the overhanging planes.

Something there was beneath them—something like an immense and luminous tablet. The tentacles were moving over it—pressing here, thrusting there, turning, pushing, manipulating—

A shuddering passed through the crowding cones. I saw the tremor shake their bristling hosts, oscillate the great spire, set the faceted disks quivering.

The trembling grew; a vibration in every separate cone that became even more rapid. There was a faint, curiously oppressive humming—like the distant echo of a tempest in chaos.

Faster, ever faster grew the vibration. Now the sharp outlines of the cones were dissolving.

And now they were—gone.

The mount of the cones had become a mighty pyramid of pale green radiance—one tremendous, pallid flame, of which the spire was the tongue. Out from the disked wheel at its shorn tip gushed a flood of light—light that gathered itself from the leaping radiance below it.

The tentacles of the Keeper moved more swiftly over the enigmatic tablet; writhing cloudily; confusedly rapid. The faceted disks wavered; turned upward; the wheel began to whirl—faster—faster—

Up from that flaming circle, out into the sky leaped a thick, pale green column of intensest light.

With prodigious speed, as compact as water, CONCENTRATE, it struck—straight out toward the face of the sun.

It thrust up with the speed of light—the speed of light? A thought came to me; incredible I believed it even as I reacted to it. My pulse

is uniformly seventy to the minute. I sought my wrist, found the artery, made allowance for its possible acceleration, began to count.

"What's the matter?" asked Drake.

"Take my glasses," I muttered, trying to keep up, while speaking, my tally. "Matches in my pocket. Smoke the lenses. I want to look at sun."

With a look of stupefied amazement which, at another time I would have found laughable, he obeyed.

"Hold them to my eyes," I ordered.

Three minutes had gone by.

There it was—that for which I sought. Clear through the darkened lenses I could see the sun spot, high up on the northern-most limb of the sun. An unimaginable cyclone of incandescent gases; an unthinkably huge dynamo pouring its floods of electro-magnetism upon all the circling planets; that solar crater which we now know was, when at its maximum, all of one hundred and fifty thousand miles across; the great sun spot of the summer of 1919—the most enormous ever recorded by astronomical science.

Five minutes had gone by.

Common sense whispered to me. There was no use keeping my eyes fixed to the glasses. Even if that thought were true—even if that pillar of radiance were a MESSENGER, an earth-hurled bolt flying to the sun through atmosphere and outer space with the speed of light, even if it were this stupendous creation of these Things, still between eight and nine minutes must elapse before it could reach the orb; and as many minutes must go by before the image of whatever its impact might produce upon the sun could pass back over the bridge of light spanning the ninety millions of miles between it and us.

And after all did not that hypothesis belong to the utterly impossible? Even were it so—what was it that the Metal Monster expected to follow? This radiant shaft, colossal as it was to us, was infinitesimal compared to the target at which it was aimed.

What possible effect could that spear have upon the solar forces?

And yet—and yet—a gnat's bite can drive an elephant mad. And Nature's balance is delicate; and what great happenings may follow the slightest disturbance of her infinitely sensitive, her complex, equilibrium? It might be—it might be—

Eight minutes had passed.

"Take the glasses," I bade Drake. "Look up at the sun spot—the big one."

"I see it." He had obeyed me. "What of it?"

Nine minutes.

The shaft, if I were right, had by now touched the sun. What was to follow?

"I don't get you at all," said Drake, and lowered the glasses.

Ten minutes.

"What's happening? Look at the Cones! Look at the Emperor!" gasped Drake.

I peered down, then almost forgot to count.

The pyramidal flame that had been the mount of Cones was shrunken. The pillar of radiance had not lessened—but the mechanism that was its source had retreated whole yards within the field of its crystal base.

And the Metal Emperor! Dulled and faint were his fires, dimmed his splendors; and fainter still were the violet luminescences of the watching Stars, the shimmering livery of his court.

The Keeper of the Cones! Were not its outstretched planes hovering lower and lower over the gleaming tablet; its tentacles moving aimlessly, feebly—wearily?

I had a sense of force being withdrawn from all about me. It was as though all the City were being drained of life—as though vitality were being sucked from it to feed this pyramid of radiance; drained from it to forge the thrusting spear piercing sunward.

The Metal People seemed to hang limply, inert; the living girders seemed to sag; the living columns to bend; to droop and to sway.

Twelve minutes.

With a nerve-racking crash one of the laden beams fell; dragging down with it others; bending, shattering in its fall a thicket of the horned columns. Behind us the sparkling eyes of the wall were dimmed, vacant—dying. Something of that hellish loneliness, that demoniac desire for immolation that had assailed us in the haunted hollow of the ruins began to creep over me.

The crowded crater was fainting. The life was going out of the City—its magnetic life, draining into the shaft of green fire.

Duller grew the Metal Emperor's glories.

Fourteen minutes.

"Goodwin," cried Drake, "the life's going out of these Things! Going out with that ray they're shooting."

Fifteen minutes.

I watched the tentacles of the Keeper grope over the tablet. Abruptly the flaming pyramid darkened—WENT OUT.

The radiant pillar hurtled upward like a thunder-bolt; vanished in space.

Before us stood the mount of cones, shrunken to a sixth of its former size.

Sixteen minutes.

All about the crater-lip the ringed shields tilted; thrust themselves on high, as though behind each was an eager lifting arm. Below them the hived clusters of disks changed from globules into wide coronets.

Seventeen minutes.

I dropped my wrist; seized the glasses from Drake; raised them to the sun. For a moment I saw nothing—then a tiny spot of white incandescence shone forth at the lower edge of the great spot. It grew into a point of radiance, dazzling even through the shadowed lenses.

I rubbed my eyes; looked again. It was still there, larger—blazing with an ever increasing and intolerable intensity.

I handed the glasses to Drake, silently.

"I see it!" he muttered. "I see it! And THAT did it—that! Goodwin!" There was panic in his cry. "Goodwin! The spot! it's widening! It's widening!"

I snatched the glasses from him. I caught again the dazzling flashing. But whether Drake HAD seen the spot widen, change—to this day I do not know.

To me it seemed unchanged—and yet—perhaps it was not. It may be that under that finger of force, that spear of light, that wound in the side of our sun HAD opened further—

That the sun had winced!

I do not to this day know. But whether it had or not—still shone the intolerably brilliant light. And miracle enough that was for me.

Twenty minutes—subconsciously I had gone on counting—twenty minutes—

About the cratered girdle of the upthrust shields a glimmering mistiness was gathering; a translucent mist, beryl pale and beryl clear. In a heart-beat it had thickened into a vast and vaporous ring through whose swarms of corpuscles the sun's reflected image upon each disk shone clear—as though seen through clouds of transparent atoms of aquamarine.

Again the filaments of the Keeper moved—feebly. As one of the hosts of circling shields shifted downward. Brilliant, ever more brilliant, waxed the fast-thickening mists.

Abruptly, and again as one, the disks began to revolve. From every concave surface, from the surfaces of the huge circlets below them, flashed out a stream of green fire—green as the fire of green life itself. Corpuscular, spun of uncounted rushing, dazzling ions the great rays struck across, impinged upon the thousand-foot wheel that crowned the cones; set it whirling.

Over it I saw form a limpid cloud of the brilliant vapors. Whence came these sparkling nebulosities, these mists of light? It was as though the clustered, spinning disks reached into the shadowless air, sucked from it some unseen, rhythmic energy and transformed it into this visible, coruscating flood.

For now it was a flood. Down from the immense wheel came pouring cataracts of green fires. They cascaded over the cones; deluged them; engulfed them.

Beneath that radiant inundation the cones grew. Perceptibly their volume increased—as though they gorged themselves upon the light. No—it was as though the corpuscles flew to them, coalesced and built themselves into the structure.

Out and further out upon the base of crystal they crept. And higher and higher soared their tips, thrusting, ever thrusting upward toward the whirling wheel that fed them.

Now from the Keeper's planes writhed the Keeper's tangle of tentacles, uncoiling eagerly, avidly, through the twenty feet of space between their source and the enigmatic mechanism they

manipulated. The crater's disks tilted downward. Into the vast hollow shot their jets of green radiance, drenching the Metal Hordes, splashing from the polished walls wherever the Metal Hordes had left those living walls exposed.

All about us was a trembling, an accelerating pulse of life. Colossal, rhythmic, ever quicker, ever more powerfully that pulse throbbed—a prodigious vibration monstrously alive.

"Feeding!" whispered Drake. "Feeding! Feeding on the sun!"

Faster danced the radiant beams. The crater was a cauldron of green fires through which the conical rays angled and interwove, crossed and mingled. And where they mingled, where they crossed, flamed out suddenly immense rayless orbs; palpitant for an instant, then dissolving in spiralling, feathery spray of pallid emerald incandescences.

Stronger and stronger beat the pulse of returning life.

A jetting stream struck squarely upon the Metal Emperor. Out blazed his splendors—jubilant. His golden zodiac, no longer tarnished and dull, ran with sun flames; the wondrous rose was a racing, lambent miracle.

Up snapped the Keeper; towered behind him, all flickering scarlets and leaping yellows—no longer wrathful or sullen.

The place dripped radiance; was filling like a chrisom with radiance.

Us, too, the sparkling mists bathed.

I was conscious of a curiously wild exhilaration; a quickening of the pulse; an abnormally rapid breathing. I stooped to touch Drake; sparks leaped from my outstretched fingers, great green sparks that crackled as they impacted upon him. He gave them no heed; but stared with fascinated eyes upon the crater.

Now from every side broke a tempest of gem fires. From every girder and column, from every arras, pendent and looping, burst diamond glitterings, ruby luminescences, lanced flames of molten emerald and sapphires, flashings of amethyst and opal, meteoric iridescences, dazzling spectrums.

The hollow was a cave of some Aladdin of the Titans ablaze with enchanted hoards. It was a place of gems ensorcelled, gems in which

imprisoned hosts of the Jinns of Light beat sparkling against their crystal walls to escape.

I thrust the fantasies from me. Fantastic enough was this reality—globe and pyramid and cube of the Metal People opening wide, bathing in, drinking from the radiant maelstrom that faster and ever faster swirled about them.

"Feeding!" It was Drake's awed voice. "Feeding on the sun!"

The circling shields were raising themselves, lifting themselves higher above the crater-lip. Into the crowded cylinder came now only the rays from the high circlets, the streams from the huge wheel above the still growing cones.

Up and up the shields rose, but by what mechanism raised I could not see. Their motion ceased; in all their thousands they turned. Over the City's top and out into the oval valley they poured their torrents of light; flooding it, deluging it even as they had this pit that was the City's heart. Feeding, I knew, those other Metal Hordes without.

And as though in answer, sweeping down upon us through the circles of open sky, a clamor poured.

"If we'd but known!" Drake's voice came to me, thin and unreal through the tumult. "It's what Ventnor meant! If we had got down there when they were so weak—if we could have handled the Keeper—we could have smashed that plate that works the Cones! We could have killed them!"

"There are other Cones," I cried back to him.

"No," he shook his head. "This is the master machine. It's what Ventnor meant when he said to strike through the sun. And we've lost the chance—"

Louder grew the hurricane without; and now within began its mate. Through the mists flashed linked tempests of lightnings. Bolt upon javelin bolt, and ever more thickly; lightnings green as the mists themselves; lightning bolts of destroying violets, searing scarlets; tearing chains of withering yellows, globes of exploding multicolored electric incandescences.

The crater was threaded with the lightnings of the Metal People; was broidered with them; was a Pit woven with vast and changing patterns of electric flame.

What was it that Drake had said? That if but we could have known we could have destroyed these—Things—Destroyed—Them? Things that could thrust their will and power up through ninety million miles of space and suck from the sun the honey of power! Drain it and hive it within these great mountains of the cones!

Destroy Things that could feed their own life into a machine to draw back from the sun a greater life—Things that could forge of their strength a spear which, piercing the side of the sun, sent gushing back upon them a tenfold, nay, a thousandfold strength!

Destroy this City that was one vast and living dynamo feeding upon the magnetic life of earth and sun!

The clamor had grown stupendous, destroying—like armored Gods roaring at sword play in a hundred Valhallas; like the war drums of battling universe; like the smitings of warring suns.

And all the City was throbbing, beating with a gigantic pulse of life—was fed and drunken with life. I felt that pulsing become my own; I echoed to it; throbbed in unison. I saw Drake outlined in flame; that around me a radiant nimbus was growing.

I thought I saw Norhala floating, clothed in shouting, flailing fires. I strove to call out to her. By me slipped the body of Drake; lay flaming at my feet upon the narrow ledge.

There was a roaring within my head—louder, far louder, than that which beat against my ears. Something was drawing me forth; drawing me out of my body into unimaginable depths of blackness. Something was hurling me out into those cold depths of space that alone could darken the fires that encircled me—the fires of which I was becoming a part.

I felt myself leap outward—outward and outward—into—oblivion.

CHAPTER XXI. PHANTASMAGORIA METALLIOUE.

Wearily I opened my eyes. Stiffly, painfully, I stirred. High above me was the tremendous circle of sky, ringed with the hosts of feeding shields. But the shields were now wanly gleaming and the sky was the sky of night.

Night? How long had I lain here? And where was Drake? I struggled to rise.

"Steady, old man," his voice came from beside me. "Steady—and quiet. How are you feeling?"

"Badly battered," I groaned. "What happened?"

"We weren't used to the show," he said. "We got all fed up at the orgy. Too much magnetism—we had a sudden and violent attack of electrical indigestion. Sh-h—look ahead of you."

Gingerly I turned. I had been lying, I now saw, head toward and prone at the base of one of the crater's walls. As my gaze swept away I noted with a curious relief that the tiny eye-points were no longer sparkling with their enigmatic life, that they were dulled and dim once more.

Before me, glimmering pallidly, bristled the mount of the Cones. Around its crystal base glittered immense egg-shaped diamond incandescences. They were both rayless and strangely—lightless; they threw no shadows nor did their lambency lessen the dimness. Beside each of these curious luminosities stood one of the sullen-fired, cruciform shapes—the Things that now I knew for the opened cubes.

They were smaller than the Keeper, indeed less than half his height. They were ranged in an almost unbroken crescent around the visible arc of the immense pedestal—and now I saw that the lights were a few feet closer to that pedestal than they. Egg-shaped as I have said, the wider end was undermost, resting in a broad cup upheld by a slender pedicle silvery-gray and metallic.

"They're building out the base," whispered Drake. "The Cones got so big they have to give them more room."

“Magnetism,” I whispered in return. “Electricity—they drew down from the sun spot. And it was more than that—I saw the Cones grow under it. It fed them as it fed the Hordes—but the Cones grew. It was as though the shields and the Cones turned pure energy into substance.”

“And if we hadn't been pretty thoroughly magnetized to start with it would have done for us,” he said.

We watched the operation going on in front of us. The cross shapes had bent, hinging above the transverse arms. They bowed in absolute unison as at some signal. Down from the horizontal plane of each whipped the long and writhing tentacles.

At the foot of every one I could now perceive a heap of some faintly glistening material. The tendrils coiled among this, then drew up something that looked like a thick rod of crystal. The bent planes straightened; simultaneously they thrust the crystalline bars toward the incandescences.

There came a curious, brittle hissing. The ends of the rods began to dissolve into dazzling, diamond rain, atomically minute, that passing through the egg-shaped lights poured upon the periphery of the pedestal. Rapidly the bars melted. Heat there must be in these lights, terrific heat—yet the Keeper's workers seemed impervious to it.

As the ends of the bars radiated into the annealing mist I saw the tentacles creep closer and ever closer to the rayless flame through which the mist flew. And at the last, as the ultimate atoms drove through, the holding tendrils were thrust almost within it; touched it, certainly.

A score of times they repeated this process while we watched. Unaware of us they seemed, or—if aware, then indifferent. More rapid became their movements, the glassy ingots streaming through the floating braziers with hardly a pause in their passing. Abruptly, as though switched, the incandescences lessened into candle-points; instantly, as at a signal, the crescent of crosses closed into a crescent of cubes.

Motionless they stood, huge blocks blackened against the dim glowing of the cones—sentient monoliths; a Druid curve; an arc of a metal Stonehenge. And as at dusk and dawn the great menhirs of

Stonehenge fill with a mysterious, granitic life, seem to be praying priests of stone, so about these gathered hierophantic illusion.

They quivered; the slender pedicles cupping, the waned lights swayed; the lights lifted and soared, upright, to their backs.

Two by two with measured pace, solemnly the cubes glided off into the encircling darkness. As they swept away there streamed behind them other scores not until then visible to us, joining pair by pair from hidden arcs.

Into the secret shadows they flowed, two by two, each bearing over it the slim shaft holding the serene flame.

Grotesquely were they like a column of monks marching with dimmed flambeau of their worship. Angled metal monks of some god of metal, carrying tapers of electric fire, withdrawing slowly from a Holy of Holies whose metallically divine Occupant knew nothing of man—nor cared to know.

Grotesque—yes. But would that I had the power to crystallize in words the underlying, alien terror every movement of the Metal Monster when disintegrate, its every manifestation when combined, evoked; the incredulous, amazed lurking always close behind the threshold of the mind; the never lifting, thin-shuddering shadow.

Smaller, dimmer waned the lights—they were gone.

We crouched, motionless. Nothing stirred; there was no sound. Without speaking we arose; crept together over the smooth floor toward the cones.

As we crossed I saw that the pave, like the walls, was built of the bodies of the Metal People; and, like the walls, they were dormant, filmed eyes oblivious to our passing. Closer we crept—were only a scant score of rods from that colossal mechanism. I noted that the crystal foundation was set low; was not more than four feet above the floor. The sturdy, dwarfed pilasters supporting it thrust up in crowded copses, merging through distance into apparent solidity.

Now, too, I realized, as I had not when looking down from above, how stupendous the structure rising from the crystal foundation was.

I began to wonder how so thin a support could bear the mount bristling above it—then remembered what it was that at first had

flown from them, shrinking them, and at last had fed and swelled them.

Light! Weightless magnetic ions; swarms of electric ions; the misty breath of the infinite energy breathing upon, condensing upon, them. Could it be that the Cones for all their apparent mass had little, if any, weight? Like ringed Saturn, thousands of times Earth's bulk, flaunting itself in the Heavens—yet if transported to our world so light that rings and all it would float like a bubble upon our oceans. The Cones towered above me—close, so close.

The Cones were weightless. How I knew I cannot say—but now, almost touching them, I did know. Nebulous, yet solid, were they; compact, yet tenuous, dense and unsubstantial.

Again the thought came to me—they were force made visible; energy made concentrate into matter.

We skirted, seeking for the tablet over which the Keeper had hovered; the mechanism which, under his tentacles, had shifted the circling shields, thrust the spear of green fire into the side of the wounded sun. Hesitantly I touched the crystal base; the edge was warm, but whether this warmth came from the dazzling rain which we had just watched build it outward or whether it was a property inherent with the substance itself I do not know.

Certainly there was no mark upon it to show where the molten mists had fallen. It was diamond hard and smooth. The nearest cones were but a scant nine feet from its rim.

Suddenly we saw the tablet; stood beside it. The shape of a great T, glimmering with a faint and limpid violet phosphorescence, it might have been, in shape and size, the palely shining shadow of the Keeper. It was a foot above the floor, and had apparently no connection with the cones.

It was made of thousands of close-packed tiny octagonal rods the tops of some of which were cupped, of others pointed; none was more than half an inch in width. There was about it a suggestion of wedded crystal and metal—as about its burden was the suggestion of mated energy and matter.

The rods were movable; they formed a keyboard unimaginably complex; a keyboard whose infinite combinations were like a Fourth Dimensional chess game. I saw that only the swarms of tentacles

that were the Keeper's hands and these only could be masters of its incredible intricacies. No Disk—not even the Emperor, no Star shape could play on it, draw out its chords of power.

But why? Why had it been so made that sullen flaming Cross alone could release its hidden meanings, made articulate its interwoven octaves? And how were its messages conveyed? Up to its bases pressed the dormant cubes—that under it they lay as well I did not doubt.

There was no visible copula of the tablet with cones; no antennae between it and the circled shields. Could it be that the impulses released by the Keeper's coilings passed through the Metal People of the pave on the upthrust Metal People of the crater rim who held the shields?

That WAS unthinkable—unthinkable because if so this mechanism was superfluous.

The swift response to the communal will that we had observed showed that the Metal Monster needed nothing of this kind for transmission of the thought of any of its units.

There was some gap here—a gap that the grouped consciousness could not bridge without other means. Clearly that was true—else why the tablet, why the Keeper's travail?

Was each of these tiny rods a mechanism akin, in a fashion, to the sending keys of the wireless; were they transmitters of subtle energy in which was enfolded command? Spellers-out of a super-Morse carrying to each responsive cell of the Metal Monster the bidding of those higher units which were to It as the brain cells are to us? That, advanced as the knowledge it implied might be, was closer to the heart of the possible.

I bent, determined, despite the well-nigh unconquerable shrinking I felt, to touch the tablet's rods.

A flickering shadow fell upon me; a flock of pulsating ochreous and scarlet shadows—

The Keeper glowed above us!

In a life that has had its share of dangers, its need for quick decisions, I recognize that few indeed of my reactions to peril have been more than purely instinctive; no more consciously courageous nor intellectually dissociate from the activating stimulus than the

shrinking of the burned hand from the brand, the will-to-live dictated rush of the cornered animal upon the thing menacing it.

One such higher functioning was when I followed Larry O'Keefe and Lakla, the Handmaiden, out to what we believed soul-destroying death in a place almost as strange as this *; another was now. Deliberately, detachedly, I studied the angrily flaming Shape.

* See “The Moon Pool” and “The Conquest of the Moon Pool.”

Compared to it we were as a pair of Hop-o'-my-Thumbs to the Giant; had it been man-shaped we would have come less than a third way up to its knees. I focussed my attention upon the twenty-foot-wide square that was the Keeper's foot. Its surface was jewel smooth, hyaline—yet beneath it was a suggestion of granulation, of close-packed, innumerable, microscopic crystals.

Within these grains whose existence was more sensed than seen glowed dull red light, smoky and sullen. At each end of the square, close to the bottom, was a diamond-shaped lozenge, cabochon, perhaps a yard in width. These were dim yellow, translucent, with no suggestion of the underlying crystallization. Sense organs I set them down to be—similar to the great ovals within the Emperor's golden zone.

My gaze traveled up to the transverse arms. They stretched sixty feet from tip to tip. At each tip were two more of the diamond figures, not dull but burning angrily with orange-and-scarlet luster. In the center of the beam was something that might have been a smoldering rubrous reflection of the Emperor's pulsing multicolored rose had each of the petals of the latter been clipped and squared.

It deepened toward its heart into a singular pattern of vermilion latticings. Into the entire figure ran numerous tiny rivulets of angry crimson and orange light, angling in interwoven patterns with never a curve nor arching.

Set at intervals between them were what looked like octagonal rosettes filled with slender silvery flutings, wan striations—like—it came to me—immense chrysanthemum buds, half opened, and carved in gray jade.

Above towered the gigantic vertical beam. Toward its top I glimpsed a huge square of flaring crimsons and bright topaz; two

other diamonds stared down upon us from just beneath it—like eyes. And over all its height the striated octagons clustered.

I felt myself lifted, floated upward. Drake's hand shot out, clung to me as together we drifted up the living wall. Opposite the latticed heart of the square-petaled rose our flight was checked. There for an instant we hung. Then the octagonal symbols stirred, unfolded like buds—

They were the nests of the Keeper's tentacles, and out from them the whiplike tendrils uncoiled, shot out and writhed toward us.

My skin flinched from their touch; my body, held in the unseen grip, was motionless. Yet when they touched their contact was not unpleasant. They were like flexible strands of glass; their smooth tips questioned us, passing through our hair, searching our faces, writhing over our clothing.

There was a pulse in the great clipped rose, a rhythmic throbbing of vermilion fire that ran into it from the angled veins, beat through the latticed nucleus and throbbed back whence it had come. The huge, high square of scarlet and yellow was liquid flame; the diamond organs beneath it seemed to smoke, to send out swirls of orange red vapor.

Holding us so the Keeper studied us.

The rhythm of the square rose, became the rhythm of my own mind. But here was none of the vast, serene and elemental calm that Ruth had described as emanating from the Metal Emperor. Powerful it was, without doubt, but in it were undertones of rage, of impatience, overtones of revolt, something incomplete and struggling. Within the disharmonies I seemed to sense a fettered force striving for freedom; energy battling against itself.

Greater grew the swarms of the tentacles winding about us like slender strands of glass, covering our faces, making breathing more and more difficult. There was a coil of them around my throat and tightening—tightening.

I heard Drake gasping, laboring for breath. I could not turn my head toward him, could not speak. Was this then to be our end?

The strangling clutch relaxed, the mass of the tentacles lessened. I was conscious of a surge of anger through the cruciform Thing that held us.

Its sullen fires blazed. I was aware of another light beating past us—beating down the Keeper's. The hosts of tendrils drew back from me. I felt myself picked from the unseen grasp, whirled in the air and drawn away.

Drake beside me, I hung now before the Shining Disk—the Metal Emperor!

He it was who had plucked us from the Keeper—and even as I swung I saw the Keeper's multitudinous, serpentine arms surge out toward us angrily and then sullenly, slowly, draw back into their nests.

And out of the Disk, clothing me, permeating me, came an immense tranquillity, a muting of all human thought, all human endeavor, an unthinkable, cosmic calm into which all that was human of me seemed to be sinking, drowning as in a fathomless abyss. I struggled against it, desperately, striving in study of the Disk to erect a barrier of preoccupation against the power pouring from it.

A dozen feet away from us the sapphire ovals centered upon us their regard. They were limpid, pellucid as gems whose giant replicas they seemed to be. The surface of the Disk ringed about by the aureate zodiac in which the nine ovals shone was a maze of geometric symbols traced in the lines of living gem fires; infinitely complex those patterns and infinitely beautiful; an infinite number of symmetric forms in which I seemed to trace all the ordered crystalline wonders of the snowflakes, the groupings of all crystalline patternings, the soul of ordered beauty that are the marvels of the Radiolaria, Nature's own miraculous book of the soul of mathematical beauty.

The flashing, petaled heart was woven of living rainbows of cold flame.

Silently we floated there while the Disk—LOOKED—at us.

And as though I had been not an actor but an observer, the weird picture of it all came to me—two men swinging like motes in mid air, on one side the flickering scarlet and orange Cruciform shape, on the other side the radiant Disk, behind the two manikins the pallid mount of the bristling cones; and high above the wan circle of the shields.

There was a ringing about us—an elfin chiming, sweet and crystalline. It came from the cones—and strangely was it their vocal synthesis, their voice. Into the vast circle of sky pierced a lance of green fire; swift in its wake uprose others.

We slid gently down, stood swaying at the Disk's base. The Keeper bent; angled. Again the planes above the supporting square hovered over the tablet. The tendrils swept down, pushed here and there, playing upon the rods some unknown symphony of power.

Thicker pulsed the lances of the aurora; changed to vast billowing curtains. The faceted wheel at the top of the central spire of the cones swung upward; a light began to stream from the cones themselves—no pillar now, but a vast circle that shot whirling into the heavens like a noose.

And like a noose it caught the aurora, snared it!

Into it the coruscating mists of mysterious flame swirled; lost their colors, became a torrent of light flying down through the ring as though through a funnel top.

Down poured the radiant corpuscles, bathing the cones. They did not glow as they had beneath the flood from the shields, and if they grew it was too slowly for me to see; the shields were motionless. Now here, now there, I saw the other rings whirl up—smaller mouths of lesser cones hidden within the body of the Metal Monster, I knew, sucking down this magnetic flux, these countless ions gushing forth from the sun.

Then as when first we had seen the phenomenon in the valley of the blue poppies, the ring vanished, hidden by a fog of coruscations—as though the force streaming through the rings became diffused after it had been caught.

Crouching, forgetful of our juxtaposition to these two unhuman, anomalous Things, we watched the play of the tentacles upon the upthrust rods.

But if we forgot, we were not forgotten!

The Emperor slipped nearer; seemed to contemplate us—quizzically, AMUSED; as a man would look down upon some curious and interesting insect, a puppy, a kitten. I sensed this amusement in the Disk's regard even as I had sensed its soul of awful tranquillity; as we had sensed the playful malice in the eye stars of

the living corridor, the curiosity in the column that had dropped us into the valley.

I felt a push—a push that was filled with a colossal, GLITTERING playfulness.

Under it I went spinning away for yards—Drake twirling close behind me. The force, whatever it was, swept out from the Emperor, but in it was no slightest hint of anger or of malice, no slightest shadow of the sinister.

Rather it was as though one would blow away a feather; urge gently some little lesser thing away.

The Disk watched our whirlings—with a sparkling, jeweled LAUGHTER in its pulsing radiance.

Again came the push—farther yet we spun. Suddenly before us, across the pave, shone out a twinkling trail—the wakened eyes of the cubes that formed it, marking out a pathway for us to follow.

Immediately upon their gleaming forth I saw the Emperor turn—his immense, oval, metallic back now black against the radiance of the cones.

Up from the narrow gleaming path—a path opened I knew by some command—lifted the hosts of tiny unseen hands; the sentient currents of magnetic force that were the fingers and arms of the Metal Hordes. They held us, thrust us along, passed us forward. Faster and faster we moved, speeding on the wake of the long-vanished metal monks.

I turned my head—the cones were already far away. Over the tablet of limpid violet phosphorescence still hovered the planes of the Keeper; and still was the oval of the Emperor black against the radiance.

But the twinkling, sparkling path between us and them was gone—was fading out close behind us as we swept onward.

Faster and faster grew our pace. The cylindrical wall loomed close. A high oblong portal showed within it. Into this we were carried. Before us stretched a corridor precisely similar to that which, closing upon us, had forced us completely out into the hall.

Unlike that passage, its floor lifted steeply—a smooth and shining slide up which no man could climb. A shaft, indeed, which thrust upward straight as an arrow at an angle of at least thirty degrees and

whose end or turning we could not see. Up and up it cleared its way through the City—through the Metal Monster—closed only by the inability of the eye to pierce the faint luminosity that thickened by distance became impenetrable.

For an instant we hovered upon its threshold. But the impulse, the command, that had carried us thus far was not to stop here. Into it and up it we were thrust, our feet barely touching the glimmering surface; lifted by the force that emanated from its floor, carried on by the force that pressed out from the sides.

Up and up we went—scores of feet—hundreds—

CHAPTER XXII. THE ENSORCELLED CHAMBER

“Goodwin!” Drake broke the silence; desperately he was striving to keep his fear out of his voice. “Goodwin—this isn't the way to get out. We're going up—farther away all the time from the—the gates!”

“What can we do?” My anxiety was no less than his, but my realization of our helplessness was complete.

“If we only knew how to talk to these Things,” he said. “If we could only have let the Disk know we wanted to get out—damn it, Goodwin, it would have helped us.”

Grotesque as the idea sounded, I felt that he spoke the truth. The Emperor meant no harm to us; in fact in speeding us away I was not at all sure that he had not deliberately wished us well—there was that about the Keeper—

Still up we sped along the shaft. I knew we must now be above the level of the valley.

“We've got to get back to Ruth! Goodwin—NIGHT! And what may have HAPPENED to her?”

“Drake, boy”—I dropped into his own colloquialism—“we're up against it. We can't help it. And remember—she's there in Norhala's home. I don't believe, I honestly don't believe, Dick, that there's any danger as long as she remains there. And Ventnor ties her fast.”

“That's true,” he said, more hopefully. “That's true—and probably Norhala is with her by now.”

“I don't doubt it,” I said cheerfully. An idea came to me—I half believed it myself. “And another thing. There's not an action here that's purposeless. We're being driven on by the command of that Thing we call the Metal Emperor. It means us no harm. Maybe—maybe this IS the way out.”

“Maybe so,” he shook his head doubtfully. “But I'm not sure. Maybe that long push was just to get us away from THERE. And it strikes me that the impulse has begun to weaken. We're not going anywhere near as fast as we were.”

I had not realized it, but our speed was slackening. I looked back—hundreds of feet behind us fell the slide. An unpleasant chill

went through me—should the magnetic grip upon us relax, withdraw, nothing could stop us from falling back along that incline to be broken like eggs at its end; that our breaths would be snuffed out by the terrific descent long before we reached that end was scant comfort.

"There are other passages opening up along this shaft," Drake said. "I'm not for trusting the Emperor too far—he has other things on his metallic mind, you know. The next one we get to, let's try to slip into—if we can."

I had noticed; there had been openings along the ascending shaft; corridors running apparently transversely to its angled way.

Slower and slower became our pace. A hundred yards above I glimpsed one of the apertures. Could we reach it? Slower and slower we arose. Now the gap was but a yard off—but we were motionless—were tottering!

Drake's arms wrapped round me. With a tremendous effort he hurled me into the portal. I dropped at its edge, writhed swiftly around, saw him slipping, slipping down—thrust my hands out to him.

He caught them. There came a wrench that tortured my arm sockets as though racked. But he held!

Slowly—I writhed back into the passage, dragging up his almost dead weight. His head appeared, his shoulders; there was a convulsion of the long body and he lay before me.

For a minute or two we lay, flat upon our backs resting. I sat up. The passage was broad, silent; apparently as endless as that from which we had just escaped.

Along it, above us, under us, the crystalline eyes were dim. It showed no sign of movement—yet had it done so there was nothing we could do save drop down the annihilating slant. Drake arose.

"I'm hungry," he said, "and I'm thirsty. I move that we eat and drink and approximately be merry."

He slung aside the haversack. From it we took food; from the canteens we drank. We did not talk. Each knew what the other was thinking; infrequently, and thank the eternal law that some call God for that, come crises in which speech seems not only petty but when against it the mind rebels as a nauseous thing.

This was such a time. At last I drew myself to my feet.

“Let's be going,” I said.

The corridor stretched straight before us; along it we paced. How far we walked I do not know; mile upon mile, it seemed. It broadened abruptly into a vast hall.

And this hall was filled with the Metal Hordes—was a gigantic workshop of them. In every shape, in every form, they seethed and toiled about it. Upon its floor were heaps of shining ores, mounds of flashing gems, piles of ingots, metallic and crystalline. High and low throughout flamed the egg-shaped incandescences; floating furnaces both great and small.

Before one of these forges, close to us, stood a Metal Thing. Its body was a twelve-foot column of smaller cubes. Upon the top was a hollow square formed of even lesser blocks—blocks hardly larger than the Little Things themselves. In the center of the open rectangle was another shaft, its top a two-foot square plate formed of a single cube.

From the sides of the hollow square sprang long arms of spheres, each tipped by a tetrahedron. They moved freely, slipping about upon their curved points of contact and like a dozen little thinking hammers, the pyramid points at their ends beat down upon as many thimble shaped objects which they thrust alternately into the unwinking brazier then laid upon the central block to shape.

A goblin workman the Thing seemed, standing there, so intent upon and so busy with its forgings.

There were scores of these animate machines; they paid no slightest heed to us as we slipped by them, clinging as closely to the wall of the immense workshop as we could.

We passed a company of other Shapes which stood two by two and close together, their tops wide spinning wheels through which the tendrils of an opened globe fed translucent, colorless ingots—the substance it seemed to me of which Norhala's shadowy walls were made, the crystal of which the bars that built out the base of the Cones were formed.

The ingots passed between the whirling faces; emerged from them as slender, long cylinders; were seized as they slipped down by a crouching block, whose place as it glided away was instantly taken by

another. In many bewildering forms, intent upon unknown activities directed toward unguessable ends, the composite, animate mechanisms labored. And all the place was filled with a goblin bustle, trollish racketings, ringing of gnomish anvils, clanging of kobold forges—a clamorous cavern filled with metal Nibelungens.

We came to the opening of another passage, a doorway piercing the walls of the workshop. Its incline, though steep, was not dangerous.

Into it we stepped; climbed onward it seemed interminably. Far ahead of us at last appeared the outline of its further entrance, silhouetted against and filled with a brighter luminosity. We drew near; stopped cautiously at its threshold, peering out.

Well it was that we had hesitated. Before us was open space—an abyss in the body of the Metal Monster.

The corridor opened into it like a window. Thrusting out our heads, we saw an unbroken wall both above and below. Half a mile away was its opposite side. Over this pit was a misty sky and not more than a thousand feet above and black against the heavens was the lip of it—the cornices of this chasm within the City.

Far, far beneath us we watched the Hordes throw themselves across the abyss in webs of curving arches and girder-straight bridges; gigantic we knew these spans must be yet dwarfed to slender footways by distance. Over them moved hurrying companies; from them came flashings, glitterings—prismatic, sun golden; plutonic scarlets, molten blues; javelins of colored light piercing upward from unfolded cubes and globes and pyramids crossing them or from busy bearers of the shining fruits of the mysterious workshops.

And as they passed the bridges swung up, coiled and thrust themselves from sight through openings that closed behind them. Ever, as they passed, close on their going whipped out other spans so that always across that abyss a sentient, shifting web was hung.

We drew back, stared into each other's white face. Panic swept through me, in quick, alternate pulse of ice and fire. For crushingly, no longer to be denied, came certainty that we were lost within the mazes of this incredible City—lost in the body of the Metal Monster

which that City was. There was a sick despair in my heart as we turned and slowly made our way back along the sloping corridor.

A hundred yards, perhaps, we had gone in silence before we stopped, gazing stupidly at an opening in the wall beside us. The portal had not been there when we had passed—of that I was certain.

"It's opened since we went by," whispered Drake.

We peered through it. The passage was narrow; its pave led downward. For a moment we hesitated, the same foreboding in both our minds. And yet—among the perils that crowded in upon us what choice had we? There could be no more danger there than here.

Both ways were—ALIVE, both obedient to impulses over which we had no more control and no more way of predetermining than mice in some complex, man-made trap. Furthermore, this shaft also ran downward, and although its pitch was less and it did not therefore drop as quickly toward that level we sought and wherein lay the openings of escape into the outer valley, it fell at right angles to the corridor through which we had come.

We knew that to retrace our steps now would but take us back to the forges and thence to the hall of the Cones and the certain peril waiting for us there.

We stepped into this opened way. For a little distance it ran straightly, then turned and sloped gently upward; and a little distance more we climbed. Then suddenly, not a hundred yards from us, gushed out a flood of soft radiance, opalescent, filled with pearly glimmerings and rosy shadows of light.

It was as though a door had opened into some world of luminescence. From it the lambent torrent poured; billowed down upon us. In its wake came music—if music the mighty harmonies, the sonorous chords, the crystalline themes and the linked chaplet of notes that were like spiralings of tiny golden star bells could be named.

Toward source of light and sound we moved, nor could we have halted nor withdrawn had we willed; the radiance drew us to it as the sun the water drop, and irresistibly the sweet, unearthly music called. Closer we came—it was a narrow alcove from which sound and light poured—into it we crept—and went no further.

We peered into a vast and columnless vault, a limitless temple of light. High up in it, strewn manifold, danced and shone soft orbs like tender suns. No pale gilt luminaries of frozen rays were these. Effulgent, jubilant, they flamed—orbs red as wine of rubies that Djinns of Al Shiraz press from his enchanted vineyards of jewels; twin orbs rosy white as breasts of pampered Babylonian maids; orbs of pulsing opalescences and orbs of the murmuring green of bursting buds of spring, crocused orbs and orbs of royal coral; suns that throbbed with singing rays of wedded rose and pearl and of sapphires and topazes amorous; orbs born of cool virginal dawns and of imperial sunsets and orbs that were the tuliped fruit of mating rainbows of fire.

They danced, these countless aureoles; they swung and threaded in radiant choral patterns, in linked harmonies of light. And as they danced their gay rays caressed and bathed myriads of the Metal Folk open beneath them. Under the rays the jewel fires of disk and star and cross leaped and pulsed and danced to the same bright rhythm.

We sought the source of the music—a tremendous thing of shimmering crystal pipes like some colossal organ. Out of the radiance around it great flames gathered, shook into sight with streamings and pennonings, in bannerets and bandrols, leaped upon the crystal pipes, and merged within them.

And as the pipes drank them the flames changed into sound!

Throbbing bass viols of roaring vernal winds, diapasons of waterfall and torrents—these had been flames of emerald; flaming trumpetings of desire that had been great streamers of scarlet—rose flames that had dissolved into echoes of fulfillment; diamond burgeonings that melted into silver symphonies like mist entangled Pleiades transmuted into melodies; chameleon harmonies to which the strange suns danced.

And now I saw—realizing with a clutch of indescribable awe, with a sense of inexplicable profanation the secret of this ensorcelled chamber.

Within every pulsing rose of irised fire that was the heart of a disk, from every rubrous, clipped rose of a cross, and from every rayed purple petaling of a star there nestled a tiny disk, a tiny cross, a tiny star, luminous and symboled even as those that cradled them.

The Metal Babes building like crystals from hearts of radiance beneath the play of jocund orbs!

Incredible blossomings of crystal and of metal whose lullabies and cradle songs were singing symphonies of flame.

It was the birth chamber of the City!

The womb of the Metal Monster!

Abruptly the walls of the niche sparkled out, the glittering eye points regarding us with a most disquieting suggestion of sentinels who, slumbering, had been caught unaware, and now awakening challenged us. Swiftly the niche closed—so swiftly that barely had we time to spring over its threshold into the corridor.

The corridor was awake—alive!

The power darted out; gripped us. Up it swept us and on. Far away a square of light appeared, grew quickly larger. Framed in it was the amethystine burning of the great ring that girdled the encircling cliffs.

I turned my head—behind us the corridor was closing!

Now the opening was so close that through it I could see the vast panorama of the valley. The wall behind us touched us; pushed us on. We thrust ourselves against it, despairingly. As well might flies have tried to press back a moving mountain.

Resistingly, inexorably we were pressed forward. Now we cowered within a yard-deep niche; now we trembled upon a foot-wide ledge.

Shuddering, gasping, we glared down the sheer drop of the City's wall. The smooth and glimmering scarp fell thousands of feet straight to the valley floor. And there were no merciful mists to hide what awaited us there; no mists anywhere. In that brief, agonized glance every detail of the Pit was disclosed with an abnormal clarity.

We tottered on the brink. The ledge melted.

Down, down we plunged, locked in each other's arms, hurtling to the shattering death so far below!

CHAPTER XXIII. THE TREACHERY OF YURUK

Was it true that Time is within ourselves—that like Space, its twin, it is only a self-created illusion of the human mind? There are hours that flash by on hummingbird wings; there are seconds that shuffle on shod in leaden shoes.

Was it true that when death faces us the consciousness finds power through its will to live to conquer the illusion—to prolong Time? That, recoiling from oblivion, we can recreate in a fractional moment whole years gone past, years yet to come—striving to lengthen our existence, stretching out our apperception beyond the phantom boundaries, overdrawing upon a Barmecide deposit of minutes, staking fresh claims upon a mirage?

How else explain the seeming slowness with which we were falling—the seeming leisureness with which the wall drifted up past us?

And was this punishment—a sentence meted out for profaning with our eyes a forbidden place; a penalty for touching with our gaze the ark of the Metal Tribes—their holy of holies—the budding place of the Metal Babes?

The valley was swinging—swinging in slow broad curves; was oscillating dizzily.

Slowly the colossal wall slipped upward.

Realization swept me; left me amazed; only half believing. This was no illusion. After that first swift plunge our fall had been checked. We were swinging—not the valley.

Deliberately, in wide arcs like pendulums, we were swinging across the City's scarp; three feet out from it, and as we swung, slowly sinking.

And now I saw the countless eyes of the watching wall again were twinkling, regarding us with impish mockery.

It was the grip of the living wall that held us; that rocked us from side to side as though giving greater breadths of it chance to behold us; that was dropping us gently, carefully, to the valley floor now a scant two thousand feet below.

A storm of rage, of intensest resentment swept me; as once before any gratitude I should have felt for escape was submerged in the utter humiliation with which it was charged.

I shook my fists at the twinkling wall, strove to kick and smite it like an angry child, cursed it—not childishly. Dared it to hurl me down to death.

I felt Drake's hand touch mine.

"Steady," he said. "Steady, old boy. It's no use. Steady. Look down."

Hot with shame for my outburst, weak from its violence, I obeyed. The valley floor was not more than a thousand feet away. Thronging about where we must at last touch, clustered and seething, was a multitude of the Metal Things. They seemed to be looking up at us, watching, waiting for us.

"Reception committee," grinned Drake.

I glanced away; over the valley. It was luminously clear; yet the sky was overcast, no stars showing. The light was no stronger than that of the moon at full, but it held a quality unfamiliar to me. It cast no shadows; though soft, it was piercing, revealing all it bathed with the distinctness of bright sunshine. The illumination came, I thought, from the encircling veils falling from the band of amethyst.

And, as I peered, out of the veils and far away sped a violet spark. With meteor speed it flew toward us. Close to the base of the vast facade it landed with a flashing of blue incandescence. I knew it for one of the Flying Things, the Mark Makers—one of the incredible messengers.

Close upon its fall came increase in the turmoil of the crowding throng awaiting us. Came, too, an abrupt change in our own motion. The long arcs lessened. We were dropped more swiftly.

Far away in the direction from which the Flying Thing had flown I sensed another movement; something coming that carried with it subtle suggestion of unlikeness to all the other incessant, linked movement over the pit. Closer it drew.

"Norhala!" gasped Drake.

Robed in her silken amber swathings, red-copper hair streaming, woven with elfin sparklings, she was racing toward the City like some lovely witch, riding upon the back of a steed of huge cubes.

Nearer she raced. More direct became our fall. Now we were dropping as though at the end of an unreeling plummet cord; the floor of the valley was no more than two hundred feet below.

"Norhala!" we shouted; and again and again—again "Norhala!"

Before our cries could have reached her the cubes swerved; came to a halt beneath us. Through the hundred feet of space between I caught the brilliancy of the weird constellations in Norhala's great eyes—saw with a vague but no less dire foreboding that on her face dwelt a terrifying, a blasting wrath.

As softly as though by the hand of a giant of cloud we were lifted out from the wall, and were set with no perceptible shock beside her on the back of the cubes.

"Norhala—" I stopped. For this was no Norhala whom we had known. Gone was all calm, vanished every trace of unearthly tranquillity. It was a Norhala awakened at last—all human.

Yet in the still rage that filled her I sensed a force, an intensity, more than human. Over the blazing eyes the brows were knit in a rigid, golden bar; the delicate nostrils were pinched; the sweet red mouth was white and merciless. It was as though in its long sleep her human self had gathered more than human strength, and that now, awakened and unleashed, the violence of its rage touched the vibrant zenith of that sphere of which her quiet had been the nadir.

She was like an urn filled and flaming with the fires of the Gods of wrath.

What was it that had awakened her—what in awakening had changed the inpouring human consciousness into this flood of fury? Foreboding gripped me.

"Norhala!" My voice was shaking. "Those we left—"

"They are gone!" The golden voice was octaves deeper, vibrant, throbbing with that muffled, menacing note that must have pulsed from the golden tambours that summoned to battle Timur's fierce hordes. "They were—taken."

"Taken!" I gasped. "Taken by what—these?" I swept my hands out toward the Metal Things milling around us.

"No! THESE are mine. These are they who obey me." The golden voice now shrilled with her passion. "Taken by—men!"

Drake had read my face although he could not understand our words.

"Ruth—"

"Taken," I said. "Both Ruth and Ventnor. Taken by the armored men—the men of Cherkis!"

"Cherkis!" She had caught the word. "Yes—Cherkis! And now he and all his men—and all his women—and every living thing he rules shall pay. And fear not—you two. For I, Norhala, will bring back my own.

"Woe, woe to you, Cherkis, and to all of yours! For I, Norhala, am awake, and I, Norhala, remember. Woe to you, Cherkis, woe—for now all ends for you!

"Not by the gods of my mother who turned their strength against her do I promise this. I, Norhala, have no need for them—I, Norhala, who have strength greater than they. And would I could crush those gods as I shall crush you, Cherkis—and every living thing of yours! Yea—and every UNLIVING thing as well!"

Not halting now was Norhala's speech; it poured from the ruthless lips—flamingly.

"We go," she cried. "And something of vengeance I have saved for you—as is your right."

She tossed her arms high; stamped upon the back of the Metal Thing that held us.

It quivered and sped away. Swiftly dwindled the City's bulk; fast faded its glimmering watchful face.

Not toward the veils of light but out over the plain we flew. Above us, crouching against the blast of our going, streamed like a silken banner Norhala's hair, gemmed with the witch lights.

We were far out now, the City far away. The cube slowed. Norhala threw high her head. From the arched, exquisite throat pealed a trumpet call—golden, summoning, imperious. Thrice it rang forth—and all the surrounding valley seemed to halt and listen.

Followed upon its ending, a chanting as goldenly sonorous. Wild, peremptory, triumphant. It was like a mustering shouting to adventurous stars, buglings to buccaneering winds, cadenced beckonings to restless ranks of viking waves, signaling to all the corsairs and picaroons of the elemental.

A cosmic call to slay!

The gigantic block upon which we rode quivered; I myself felt a thousand needle-pointed roving arrows prick me, urging me on to some jubilant, reckless orgy of destruction.

Obeying that summoning there swirled to us cube and globe and pyramid by the score—by the hundreds. They swept into our wake and followed—lifting up behind us, an ever-rising sea.

Higher and higher arose the metal wave—mounting, ever mounting as other score upon score leaped upon it, rushed up it and swelled its crest. And soon so great it was that it shadowed us, hung over us.

The cubes we rode angled in their course; raced now with ever-increasing speed toward the spangled curtains.

And still Norhala's golden chant lured; higher and even higher reached the following wave. Now we were rising upon a steep slope; now the amethystine, gleaming ring was almost overheard.

Norhala's song ceased. One breathless, soundless moment and we had pierced the veils. A globule of sapphire shone afar, the elfin bubble of her home. We neared it.

Heart leaping, I saw three ponies, high and empty saddles turquoise studded, lift their heads from their roadway browsing. For a moment they stood, stiff with terror; then whimpering raced away.

We were at Norhala's door; were lifted down; stood close to its threshold. Slaves to a single thought, Drake and I sprang to enter.

"Wait!" Norhala's white hands caught us. "There is peril there—without me! Me you must—follow!"

Upon the exquisite face was no unshadowing of wrath, no diminishing of rage, no weakening of dreadful determination. The star-flecked eyes were not upon us; they looked over and beyond—coldly, calculatingly.

"Not enough," I heard her whisper. "Not enough—for that which I will do."

We turned, following her gaze. A hundred feet on high, stretching nearly across the gorge, an incredible curtain was flung. Over its folds was movement—arms of spinning globes that thrust forth like paws and down upon which leaped pyramid upon pyramid stiffening as they clung like bristling spikes of hair; great bars of clicking cubes

that threw themselves from the shuttering—shook and withdrew. The curtain was a ferment—shifting, mercurial; it throbbed with desire, palpitated with eagerness.

"Not enough!" murmured Norhala.

Her lips parted; from them came another trumpeting—tyrannic, arrogant and clangorous. Under it the curtaining writhed—out from it spurted thin cascades of cubes. They swarmed up into tall pillars that shook and swayed and gyrated.

With blinding flash upon flash the sapphire incandescences struck forth at their feet. A score of flaming columned shapes leaped up and curved in meteor flight over the tumultuous curtain. Streaming with violet fires they shot back to the valley of the City.

"Hai!" shouted Norhala as they flew. "Hai!"

Up darted her arms; the starry galaxies of her eyes danced madly, shot forth visible rays. The mighty curtain of the Metal Things pulsed and throbbed; its units interweaving—block and globe and pyramid of which it was woven, each seeming to strain at leash.

"Come!" cried Norhala—and led the way through the portal.

Close behind her we pressed. I stumbled, nearly fell, over a brown-faced, leather-cuirassed body that lay half over, legs barring the threshold.

Contemptuously Norhala stepped over it. We were within that chamber of the pool. About it lay a fair dozen of the armored men. Ruth's defense, I thought with a grim delight, had been most excellent—those who had taken her and Ventnor had not done so without paying full toll.

A violet flashing drew my eyes away. Close to the pool wherein we had first seen the white miracle of Norhala's body, two immense, purple fired stars blazed. Between them, like a suppliant cast from black iron, was Yuruk.

Poised upon their nether tips the stars guarded him. Head touching his knees, eyes hidden within his folded arms, the black eunuch crouched.

"Yuruk!"

There was an unearthly mercilessness in Norhala's voice.

The eunuch raised his head; slowly, fearfully.

“Goddess!” he whispered. “Goddess! Mercy!”

“I saved him,” she turned to us, “for you to slay. He it was who brought those who took the maid who was mine and the helpless one she loved. Slay him.”

Drake understood—his hand twitched down to his pistol, drew it. He leveled the gun at the black eunuch. Yuruk saw it—shrieked and cowered. Norhala laughed—sweetly, ruthlessly.

“He dies before the stroke falls,” she said. “He dies doubly therefore—and that is well.”

Drake slowly lowered the automatic; turned to me.

“I can't,” he said. “I can't—do it—”

“Masters!” Upon his knees the eunuch writhed toward us. “Masters—I meant no wrong. What I did was for love of the Goddess. Years upon years I have served her. And her mother before her.

“I thought if the maid and the blasted one were gone, that you would follow. Then I would be alone with the Goddess once more. Cherkis will not slay them—and Cherkis will welcome you and give the maid and the blasted one back to you for the arts that you can teach him.

“Mercy, Masters, I meant no harm—bid the Goddess be merciful!”

The ebon pools of eyes were clarified of their ancient shadows by his terror; age was wiped from them by fear, even as it was wiped from his face. The wrinkles were gone. Appallingly youthful, the face of Yuruk prayed to us.

“Why do you wait?” she asked us. “Time presses, and even now we should be on the way. When so many are so soon to die, why tarry over one? Slay him!”

“Norhala,” I answered, “we cannot slay him so. When we kill, we kill in fair fight—hand to hand. The maid we both love has gone, taken with her brother. It will not bring her back if we kill him through whom she was taken. We would punish him—yes, but slay him we cannot. And we would be after the maid and her brother quickly.”

A moment she looked at us, perplexity shading the high and steady anger.

“As you will,” she said at last; then added, half sarcastically, “Perhaps it is because I who am now awake have slept so long that I cannot understand you. But Yuruk has disobeyed ME. That of MINE which I committed to his care he has given to the enemies of me and those who were mine. It matters nothing to me what YOU would do. Matters to me only what I will to do.”

She pointed to the dead.

“Yuruk”—the golden voice was cold—“gather up these carrion and pile them together.”

The eunuch arose, stole out fearfully from between the two stars. He slithered to body after body, dragging them one after the other to the center of the chamber, lifting them and forming of them a heap. One there was who was not dead. His eyes opened as the eunuch seized him, the blackened mouth opened.

“Water!” he begged. “Give me drink. I burn!”

I felt a thrill of pity; lifted my canteen and walked toward him.

“You of the beard,” the merciless chime rang out, “he shall have no water. But drink he shall have, and soon—drink of fire!”

The soldier's fevered eyes rolled toward her, saw and read aright the ruthlessness in the beautiful face.

“Sorceress!” he groaned. “Cursed spawn of Ahriman!” He spat at her.

The black talons of Yuruk stretched around his throat

“Son of unclean dogs!” he whined. “You dare blaspheme the Goddess!”

He snapped the soldier's neck as though it had been a rotten twig.

At the callous cruelty I stood for an instant petrified; I heard Drake swear wildly, saw his pistol flash up.

Norhala struck down his arm.

“Your chance has passed,” she said, “and not for THAT shall you slay him.”

And now Yuruk had cast that body upon the others; the pile was complete.

“Mount!” commanded Norhala, and pointed. He cast himself at her feet, writhing, moaning, imploring. She looked at one of the

great Shapes; something of command passed from her, something it understood plainly.

The star slipped forward—there was an almost imperceptible movement of its side points. The twitching form of the black seemed to leap up from the floor, to throw itself like a bag upon the mound of the dead.

Norhala threw up her hands. Out of the violet ovals beneath the upper tips of the Things spurted streams of blue flame. They fell upon Yuruk and splashed over him upon the heap of the slain. In the mound was a dreadful movement, a contortion; the bodies stiffened, seemed to try to rise, to push away—dead nerves and muscles responding to the blasting energy passing through them.

Out from the stars rained bolt upon bolt. In the chamber was the sound of thunder, crackling like broken glass. The bodies flamed, crumbled. There was a little smoke—nauseous, feebly protesting, beaten out by the consuming fires almost before it could rise.

Where had been the heap of slain capped by the black eunuch there was but a little whirling cloud of sad gray dust. Caught by a passing draft, it eddied, slipped over the floor, vanished through the doorway. Motionless stood the blasting stars, contemplating us. Motionless stood Norhala, her wrath no whit abated by the ghastly sacrifice. And paralyzed by what we had beheld, motionless stood we.

"Listen," she said. "You two who love the maid. What you have seen is nothing to that which you SHALL see—a wisp of mist to the storm cloud."

"Norhala"—I found speech—"can you tell us when it was that the maid was captured?"

Perhaps there was still time to overtake the abductors before Ruth was thrust into the worse peril waiting where she was being carried. Crossed this thought another—puzzling, baffling. The cliffs Yuruk had pointed out to me as those through which the hidden way passed were, I had estimated then, at least twenty miles away. And how long was the pass, the tunnel, through them? And then how far this place of the armored men? It had been past dawn when Drake had frightened the black eunuch with his pistol. It was not yet dawn now.

How could Yuruk have made his way to the Persians so swiftly—how could they so swiftly have returned?

Amazingly she answered the spoken question and the unspoken.

"They came long before dusk," she said. "By the night before Yuruk had won to Ruszark, the city of Cherkis; and long before dawn they were on their way hither. This the black dog I slew told me."

"But Yuruk was with us here at dawn yesterday," I gasped.

"A night has passed since then," she said, "and another night is almost gone."

Stunned, I considered this. If this were true—and not for an instant did I doubt her—then not for a few hours had we lain there at the foot of the living wall in the Hall of the Cones—but for the balance of that day and that night, and another day and part of still another night.

"What does she say?" Drake stared anxiously into my whitened face. I told him.

"Yes." Norhala spoke again. "The dusk before the last dusk that has passed I returned to my house. The maid was there and sorrowing. She told me you had gone into the valley, prayed me to help you and to bring you back. I comforted her, and something of—the peace—I gave her; but not all, for she fought against it. A little we played together, and I left her sleeping. I sought you and found you also sleeping. I knew no harm would come to you, and I went my ways—and forgot you. Then I came here again—and found Yuruk and these the maid had slain."

The great eyes flashed.

"Now do I honor the maid for the battle that she did," she said, "though how she slew so many strong men I do not know. My heart goes out to her. And therefore when I bring her back she shall no more be plaything to Norhala, but sister. And with you it shall be as she wills. And woe to those who have taken her!"

She paused, listening. From without came a rising storm of thin wailings, insistent and eager.

"But I have an older vengeance than this to take," the golden voice tolled somberly. "Long have I forgotten—and shame I feel that I had forgot. So long have I forgotten all hatreds, all lusts, all cruelty—among—these—" She thrust a hand forth toward the hidden

valley. “Forgot—dwelling in the great harmonies. Save for you and what has befallen I would never have stirred from them, I think. But now awakened, I take that vengeance. After it is done”—she paused—“after it is over I shall go back again. For this awakening has in it nothing of the ordered joy I love—it is a fierce and slaying fire. I shall go back—”

The shadow of her far dreaming flitted over, softened the angry brilliancy of her eyes.

“Listen, you two!” The shadow of dream fled. “Those that I am about to slay are evil—evil are they all, men and women. Long have they been so—yea, for cycles of suns. And their children grow like them—or if they be gentle and with love for peace they are slain or die of heartbreak. All this my mother told me long ago. So no more children shall be born from them either to suffer or to grow evil.”

Again she paused, nor did we interrupt her musing.

“My father ruled Ruszark,” she said at last. “Rustum he was named, of the seed of Rustum the Hero even as was my mother. They were gentle and good, and it was their ancestors who built Ruszark when, fleeing from the might of Iskander, they were sealed in the hidden valley by the falling mountain.

“Then there sprang from one of the families of the nobles—Cherkis. Evil, evil was he, and as he grew he lusted for rule. On a night of terror he fell upon those who loved my father and slew; and barely had my father time to fly from the city with my mother, still but a bride, and a handful of those loyal to him.

“They found by chance the way to this place, hiding in the cleft which is its portal. They came, and they were taken by—Those who are now my people. Then my mother, who was very beautiful, was lifted before him who rules here and she found favor in his sight and he had built for her this house, which now is mine.

“And in time I was born—but not in this house. Nay—in a secret place of light where, too, are born my people.”

She was silent. I shot a glance at Drake. The secret place of light—was it not that vast vault of mystery, of dancing orbs and flames transmuted into music into which we had peered and for which sacrilege, I had thought, had been thrust from the City? And did in this lie the explanation of her strangeness? Had she there

sucked in with her mother's milk the enigmatic life of the Metal Hordes, been transformed into half human changeling, become true kin to them? What else could explain—

"My mother showed me Ruszark," her voice, taking up once more her tale, checked my thoughts. "Once when I was little she and my father bore me through the forest and through the hidden way. I looked upon Ruszark—a great city it is and populous, and a caldron of cruelty and of evil.

"Not like me were my father and mother. They longed for their kind and sought ever for means to regain their place among them. There came a time when my father, driven by his longing, ventured forth to Ruszark, seeking friends to help him regain that place—for these who obey me obeyed not him as they obey me; nor would he have marched them—as I shall—upon Ruszark if they had obeyed him.

"Cherkis caught him. And Cherkis waited, knowing well that my mother would follow. For Cherkis knew not where to seek her, nor where they had lain hid, for between his city and here the mountains are great, unscalable, and the way through them is cunningly hidden; by chance alone did my mother's mother and those who fled with her discover it: And though they tortured him, my father would not tell. And after a while forthwith those who still remained of hers stole out with my mother to find him. They left me here with Yuruk. And Cherkis caught my mother."

The proud breasts heaved, the eyes shot forth visible flames.

"My father was flayed alive and crucified," she said. "His skin they nailed to the City's gates. And when Cherkis had had his will with my mother he threw her to his soldiers for their sport.

"All of those who went with them he tortured and slew—and he and his laughed at their torment. But one there was who escaped and told me—me who was little more than a budding maid. He called on me to bring vengeance—and he died. A year passed—and I am not like my mother and my father—and I forgot—dwelling here in the great tranquillities, barred from and having no thought for men and their way.

"AIE, AIE!" she cried; "woe to me that I could forget! But now I shall take my vengeance—I, Norhala, will stamp them flat—Cherkis

and his city of Ruszark and everything it holds! I, Norhala, and my servants shall stamp them into the rock of their valley so that none shall know that they have been! And would that I could meet their gods with all their powers that I might break them, too, and stamp them into the rock under the feet of my servants!"

She threw out white arms.

Why had Yuruk lied to me? I wondered as I watched her. The Disk had not slain her mother. Of course! He had lied to play upon our terrors; had lied to frighten us away.

The wailings were rising in a sustained crescendo. One of the slaying stars slipped over the chamber floor, folded its points and glided out the door.

"Come!" commanded Norhala, and led the way. The second star closed, followed us. We stepped over the threshold.

For one astounded, breathless moment we paused. In front of us reared a monster—a colossal, headless Sphinx. Like forelegs and paws, a ridge of pointed cubes, and globes thrust against each side of the canyon walls. Between them for two hundred feet on high stretched the breast.

And this was a shifting, weaving mass of the Metal Things; they formed into gigantic cuirasses, giant bucklers, corselets of living mail. From them as they moved—nay, from all the monster—came the wailings. Like a headless Sphinx it crouched—and as we stood it surged forward as though it sprang a step to greet us.

"HAI!" shouted Norhala, battle buglings ringing through the golden voice. "HAI! my companies!"

Out from the summit of the breast shot a tremendous trunk of cubes and spinning globes. And like a trunk it nuzzled us, caught us up, swept us to the crest. An instant I tottered dizzily; was held; stood beside Norhala upon a little, level twinkling eyed platform; upon her other side swayed Drake.

Now through the monster I felt a throbbing, an eager and impatient pulse. I turned my head. Still like some huge and grotesque beast the back of the clustered Things ran for half a mile at least behind, tapering to a dragon tail that coiled and twisted another full mile toward the Pit. And from this back uprose and fell immense spiked and fan-shaped ruffs, thickets of spikes, whipping

knouts of bristling tentacles, fanged crests. They thrust and waved, whipped and fell constantly; and constantly the great tail lashed and snapped, fantastic, long and living.

"HAI!" shouted Norhala once more. From her lifted throat came again the golden chanting—but now a relentless, ruthless song of slaughter.

Up reared the monstrous bulk. Into it ran the dragon tail. Into it poured the fanged and bristling back.

Up, up we were thrust—three hundred feet, four hundred, five hundred. Over the blue globe of Norhala's house bent a gigantic leg. Spiderlike out from each side of the monster thrust half a score of others.

Overhead the dawn began to break. Through it with ever increasing speed we moved, straight to the line of the cliffs behind which lay the city of the armored men—and Ruth and Ventnor.

CHAPTER XXIV. RUSZARK

Smoothly moved the colossal shape; on it we rode as easily as though cradled. It did not glide—it strode.

The columned legs raised themselves, bending from a thousand joints. The pedestals of the feet, huge and massive as foundations for sixteen-inch guns, fell with machinelike precision, stamping gigantically.

Under their tread the trees of the forest snapped, were crushed like reeds beneath the pads of a mastodon. From far below came the sound of their crashing. The thick forest checked the progress of the Shape less than tall grass would that of a man.

Behind us our trail was marked by deep, black pits in the forest's green, clean cut and great as the Mark upon the poppied valley. They were the footprints of the Thing that carried us.

The wind streamed and whistled. A flock of the willow warblers arose, sworled about us with manifold beating of little frightened wings. Norhala's face softened, her eyes smiled.

“Go—foolish little ones,” she cried, and waved her arms. They flew away, scolding.

A lammergeier swooped down on wide funereal wings; it peered at us; darted away toward the cliffs.

“There will be no carrion there for you, black eater of the dead, when I am through,” I heard Norhala whisper, eyes again somber.

Steadily grew the dawn light; from Norhala's lips came again the chanting. And now that paean, the reckless pulse of the monster we rode, began to creep through my own veins. Into Drake's too, I knew, for his head was held high and his eyes were clear and bright as hers who sang.

The jubilant pulse streamed through the hands that held us, throbbed through us. The pulse of the Thing—sang!

Closer and closer grew the cliffs. Down and crashing down fell the trees, the noise of their fall accompanying the battle chant of the Valkyr beside me like wild harp chords of storm-lashed surf. Up to the precipices the forest rolled, unbroken. Now the cliffs loomed overhead. The dawn had passed. It was full day.

Cutting up through the towering granite scarps was a rift. In it the black shadows clustered thickly. Straight toward that cleft we sped. As we drew near, the crest of the Shape began swiftly to lower. Down we sank and down—a hundred feet, two hundred; now we were two score yards above the tree tops.

Out shot a neck, a tremendous serpent body. Crested it was with pyramids; crested with them, too, was its immense head. Thickly the head bristled with them, poised motionless upon spinning globes as huge as they. For hundreds of feet that incredible neck stretched ahead of us and for twice as far behind a monstrous, lizard-shaped body writhed.

We rode now upon a serpent, a glittering blue metal dragon, spiked and knobbed and scaled. It was the weird steed of Norhala flattening, thrusting out to pierce the rift.

And still as when it had reared on high beat through it the wild, triumphant, questing pulse. Still rang out Norhala's chanting.

The trees parted and fell upon each side of us as though we were some monster of the sea and they the waves we cleft.

The rift enclosed us. Lower we dropped; were not more than fifty feet above its floor. The Thing upon which we rode was a torrent roaring through it.

A deeper blackness enclosed us—a tunneling.

Through that we flowed. Out of it we darted into a widening filled with wan light drifting down through a pinnacle fanged mouth miles on high. Again the cleft shrunk. A thousand feet ahead was a crack, a narrowing of the cleft so small that hardly could a man pass through it.

Abruptly the metal dragon halted.

Norhala's chanting changed; became again the arrogant clarioning. And close below us the huge neck split. It came to me then that it was as though Norhala were the overspirit of this chimera—as though it caught and understood and obeyed each quick thought of hers.

As though, indeed, she was a PART of it—as IT was in reality a part of that infinitely greater Thing, crouching there in its lair of the Pit—the Metal Monster that had lent this living part of itself to her for a steed, a champion. Little time had I to consider such matters.

Up thrust the Shape before us. Into it raced and spun Things angled, Things curved and Things squared. It gathered itself into a Titanic pillar out of which, instantly, thrust scores of arms.

Over them great globes raced; after these flew other scores of huge pyramids, none less than ten feet in height, the mass of them twenty and thirty. The manifold arms grew rigid. Quiet for a moment, a Titanic metal Briareous, it stood.

Then at the tips of the arms the globes began to spin—faster, faster. Upon them I saw the hosts of the pyramids open—as one into a host of stars. The cleft leaped out in a flood of violet light.

Now for another instant the stars which had been motionless, poised upon the whirling spheres, joined in their mad spinning. Cyclopean pin wheels they turned; again as one they ceased. More brilliant now was their light, dazzling; as though in their whirling they had gathered greater force.

Under me I felt the split Thing quiver with eagerness.

From the stars came a hurricane of lightning! A cataract of electric flame poured into the crack, splashed and guttered down the granite walls. We were blinded by it; were deafened with thunders.

The face of the precipice smoked and split; was whirled away in clouds of dust.

The crack widened—widened as a gulley in a sand bank does when a swift stream rushes through it. Lightnings these were—and more than lightnings; lightnings keyed up to an invincible annihilating weapon that could rend and split and crumble to atoms the living granite.

Steadily the cleft expanded. As its walls melted away the Blasting Thing advanced, spurting into it the flaming torrents. Behind it we crept. The dust of the shattered rocks swirled up toward us like angry ghosts—before they reached us they were blown away as though by strong winds streaming from beneath us.

On we went, blinded, deafened. Interminably, it seemed, poured forth the hurricane of blue fire; interminably the thunder bellowed.

There came a louder clamor—volcanic, chaotic, dulling the thunders. The sides of the cleft quivered, bent outward. They split; crashed down. Bright daylight poured in upon us, a flood of light

toward which the billows of dust rushed as though seeking escape; out it poured like the smoke of ten thousand cannon.

And the Blasting Thing shook—as though with laughter!

The stars closed. Back into the Shape ran globe and pyramid. It slid toward us—joined the body from which it had broken away. Through all the mass ran a wave of jubilation, a pulse of mirth—a colossal, metallic—SILENT—roar of laughter.

We glided forward—out of the cleft. I felt a shifting movement.

Up and up we were thrust. Dazed I looked behind me. In the face of a sky climbing wall of rock, smoked a wide chasm. Out of it the billowing clouds of dust still streamed, pursuing, threatening us. The whole granite barrier seemed to quiver with agony. Higher we rose and higher.

"Look," whispered Drake, and whirled me around.

Less than five miles away was Ruszark, the City of Cherkis. And it was like some ancient city come into life out of long dead centuries. A page restored from once conquering Persia's crumbled book. A city of the Chosroes transported by Jinns into our own time.

Built around and upon a low mount, it stood within a valley but little larger than the Pit. The plain was level, as though once it had been the floor of some primeval lake; the hill of the City was its only elevation.

Beyond, I caught the glinting of a narrow stream, meandering. The valley was ringed with precipitous cliffs falling sheer to its floor.

Slowly we advanced.

The city was almost square, guarded by double walls of hewn stone. The first raised itself a hundred feet on high, turreted and parapeted and pierced with gates. Perhaps a quarter of a mile behind it the second fortification thrust up.

The city itself I estimated covered about ten square miles. It ran upward in broad terraces. It was very fair, decked with blossoming gardens and green groves. Among the clustering granite houses, red and yellow roofed, thrust skyward tall spires and towers. Upon the mount's top was a broad, flat plaza on which were great buildings, marble white and golden roofed; temples I thought, or palaces, or both.

Running to the city out of the grain fields and steads that surrounded it, were scores of little figures, rat-like. Here and there among them I glimpsed horsemen, arms and armor glittering. All were racing to the gates and the shelter of the battlements.

Nearer we drew. From the walls came now a faint sound of gongs, of drums, of shrill, flutelike pipings. Upon them I could see hosts gathering; hosts of swarming little figures whose bodies glistened, from above whom came gleamings—the light striking upon their helms, their spear and javelin tips.

"Ruszark!" breathed Norhala, eyes wide, red lips cruelly smiling. "Lo—I am before your gates. Lo—I am here—and was there ever joy like this!"

The constellations in her eyes blazed. Beautiful, beautiful was Norhala—as Isis punishing Typhon for the murder of Osiris; as avenging Diana; shining from her something of the spirit of all wrathful Goddesses.

The flaming hair whirled and snapped. From all her sweet body came white-hot furious force, a withering perfume of destruction. She pressed against me, and I trembled at the contact.

Lawless, wild imaginings ran through me. Life, human life, dwindled. The City seemed but a thing of toys.

On—let us crush it! On—on!

Again the monster shook beneath us. Faster we moved. Louder grew the clangor of the drums, the gongs, the pipes. Nearer came the walls; and ever more crowded with the swarming human ants that manned them.

We were close upon the heels of the last fleeing stragglers. The Thing slackened in its stride; waited patiently until they were close to the gates. Before they could reach them I heard the brazen clanging of their valves. Those shut out beat frenziedly upon them; dragged themselves close to the base of the battlements, cowered there or crept along them seeking some hole in which to hide.

With a slow lowering of its height the Thing advanced. Now its form was that of a spindle a full mile in length on whose bulging center we three stood.

A hundred feet from the outer wall we halted. We looked down upon it not more than fifty feet above its broad top. Hundreds of the

soldiers were crouching behind the parapets, companies of archers with great bows poised, arrows at their cheeks, scores of leather jerkined men with stands of javelins at their right hands, spearsmen and men with long, thonged slings.

Set at intervals were squat, powerful engines of wood and metal beside which were heaps of huge, rounded boulders. Catapults I knew them to be and around each swarmed a knot of soldiers, fixing the great stones in place, drawing back the thick ropes that, loosened, would hurl forth the projectiles. From each side came other men, dragging more of these balisters; assembling a battery against the prodigious, gleaming monster that menaced their city.

Between outer wall and inner battlements galloped squadrons of mounted men. Upon this inner wall the soldiers clustered as thickly as on the outer, preparing as actively for its defense.

The city seethed. Up from it arose a humming, a buzzing, as of some immense angry hive.

Involuntarily I visualized the spectacle we must present to those who looked upon us—this huge incredible Shape of metal alive with quicksilver shifting. This—as it must have seemed to them—hellish mechanism of war captained by a sorceress and two familiars in form of men. There came to me dreadful visions of such a monster looking down upon the peace-reared battlements of New York—the panic rush of thousands away from it.

There was a blaring of trumpets. Up on the parapet leaped a man clad all in gleaming red armor. From head to feet the close linked scales covered him. Within a hood shaped somewhat like the tight-fitting head coverings of the Crusaders a pallid, cruel face looked out upon us; in the fierce black eyes was no trace of fear.

Evil as Norhala had said these people of Ruszark were, wicked and cruel—they were no cowards, no!

The red armored man threw up a hand.

“Who are you?” he shouted. “Who are you three, you three who come driving down upon Ruszark through the rocks? We have no quarrel with you?”

“I seek a man and a maid,” cried Norhala. “A maid and a sick man your thieves took from me. Bring him forth!”

“Seek elsewhere for them then,” he answered. “They are not here. Turn now and seek elsewhere. Go quickly, lest I loose our might upon you and you go never.”

Mockingly rang her laughter—and under its lash the black eyes grew fiercer, the cruelty on the white face darkened.

“Little man whose words are so big! Fly who thunders! What are you called, little man?”

Her raillery bit deep—but its menace passed unheeded in the rage it called forth.

“I am Kulun,” shouted the man in scarlet armor. “Kulun, the son of Cherkis the Mighty, and captain of his hosts. Kulun—who will cast your skin under my mares in stall for them to trample and thrust your red flayed body upon a pole in the grain fields to frighten away the crows! Does that answer you?”

Her laughter ceased; her eyes dwelt upon him—filled with an infernal joy.

“The son of Cherkis!” I heard her murmur. “He has a son—”

There was a sneer on the cruel face; clearly he thought her awed. Quick was his disillusionment.

“Listen, Kulun,” she cried. “I am Norhala—daughter of another Norhala and of Rustum, whom Cherkis tortured and slew. Now go, you lying spawn of unclean toads—go and tell your father that I, Norhala, am at his gates. And bring back with you the maid and the man. Go, I say!”

CHAPTER XXV. CHERKIS

There was stark amazement on Kulun's face; and fear now enough. He dropped from the parapet among his men. There came one loud trumpet blast.

Out from the battlements poured a storm of arrows, a cloud of javelins. The squat catapults leaped forward. From them came a hail of boulders. Before that onrushing tempest of death I flinched.

I heard Norhala's golden laughter and before they could reach us arrow and javelin and boulder were checked as though myriads of hands reached out from the Thing under us and caught them. Down they dropped.

Forth from the great spindle shot a gigantic arm, hammer tipped with cubes. It struck the wall close to where the scarlet armored Kulun had vanished.

Under its blow the stones crumbled. With the fragments fell the soldiers; were buried beneath them.

A hundred feet in width a breach gaped in the battlements. Out shot the arm again; hooked its hammer tip over the parapet, tore away a stretch of the breastwork as though it had been cardboard. Beside the breach an expanse of the broad flat top lay open like a wide platform.

The arm withdrew, and out from the whole length of the spindle thrust other arms, hammer tipped, held high aloft, menacing.

From all the length of the wall arose panic outcry. Abruptly the storm of arrows ended; the catapults were still. Again the trumpets sounded; the crying ceased. Down fell a silence, terrified, stifling.

Kulun stepped forth again, both hands held high. Gone was his arrogance.

“A parley,” he shouted. “A parley, Norhala. If we give you the maid and man, will you go?”

“Go get them,” she answered. “And take with you this my command to Cherkis—that HE return with the two!”

For an instant Kulun hesitated. Up thrust the dreadful arms, poised themselves to strike.

“It shall be so,” he shouted. “I carry your command.”

He leaped back, his red mail flashed toward a turret that held, I supposed, a stairway. He was lost to sight. In silence we waited.

On the further side of the city I glimpsed movement. Little troops of mounted men, pony drawn wains, knots of running figures were fleeing from the city through the opposite gates.

Norhala saw them too. With that incomprehensible, instant obedience to her unspoken thought a mass of the Metal Things separated from us; whirled up into a dozen of those obelisked forms I had seen march from the cat eyes of the City of the Pit.

In but a breath, it seemed, their columns were far off, herding back the fugitives.

They did not touch them, did not offer to harm—only, grotesquely, like dogs heading off and corraling frightened sheep, they circled and darted. Rushing back came those they herded.

From the watching terraces and walls arose shrill cries of terror, a wailing. Far away the obelisks met, pirouetted, melted into one thick column. Towering, motionless as we, it stood, guarding the further gates.

There was a stir upon the wall, a flashing of spears, of drawn blades. Two litters closed with curtainings, surrounded by triple rows of swordsmen fully armored, carrying small shields and led by Kulun were being borne to the torn battlement.

Their bearers stopped well within the platform and gently lowered their burdens. The leader of those around the second litter drew aside its covering, spoke.

Out stepped Ruth and after her—Ventnor!

"Martin!" I could not keep back the cry; heard mingled with it Drake's own cry to Ruth. Ventnor raised his hand in greeting; I thought he smiled.

The cubes on which we stood shot forward; stopped within fifty feet of them. Instantly the guard of swordsmen raised their blades, held them over the pair as though waiting the signal to strike.

And now I saw that Ruth was not clad as she had been when we had left her. She stood in scanty kirtle that came scarcely to her knees, her shoulders were bare, her curly brown hair unbound and tangled. Her face was set with wrath hardly less than that which beat

from Norhala. On Ventnor's forehead was a blood red scar, a line that ran from temple to temple like a brand.

The curtains of the first litter quivered; behind them someone spoke. That in which Ruth and Ventnor had ridden was drawn swiftly away. The knot of swordsmen drew back.

Into their places sprang and knelt a dozen archers. They ringed in the two, bows drawn taut, arrows in place and pointing straight to their hearts.

Out of the litter rolled a giant of a man. Seven feet he must have been in height; over the huge shoulders, the barreled chest and the bloated abdomen hung a purple cloak glittering with gems; through the thick and grizzled hair passed a flashing circlet of jewels.

The scarlet armored Kulun beside him, swordsmen guarding them, he walked to the verge of the torn gap in the wall. He peered down it, glancing imperturbably at the upraised, hammer-banded arms still threatening; examined again the breach. Then still with Kulun he strode over to the very edge of the broken battlement and stood, head thrust a little forward, studying us in silence.

"Cherkis!" whispered Norhala—the whisper was a hymn to Nemesis. I felt her body quiver from head to foot.

A wave of hatred, a hot desire to kill, passed through me as I scanned the face staring at us. It was a great gross mask of evil, of cold cruelty and callous lusts. Unwinking, icily malignant, black slits of eyes glared at us between pouches that held them half closed. Heavy jowls hung pendulous, dragging down the corners of the thick lipped, brutal mouth into a deep graven, unchanging sneer.

As he gazed at Norhala a flicker of lust shot like a licking tongue through his eyes.

Yet from him pulsed power; sinister, instinct with evil, concentrate with cruelty—but power indomitable. Such was Cherkis, descendant perhaps of that Xerxes the Conqueror who three millenniums gone ruled most of the known world.

It was Norhala who broke the silence.

"Tcherak! Greeting—Cherkis!" There was merciless mirth in the buglings of her voice. "Lo, I did but knock so gently at your gates and you hastened to welcome me. Greetings—gross swine, spittle of the toads, fat slug beneath my sandals."

He passed the insults by, unmoved—although I heard a murmuring go up from those near and Kulun's hard eyes blazed.

"We will bargain, Norhala," he answered calmly; the voice was deep, filled with sinister strength.

"Bargain?" she laughed. "What have you with which to bargain, Cherkis? Does the rat bargain with the tigress? And you, toad, have nothing."

He shook his head.

"I have these," he waved a hand toward Ruth and her brother. "Me you may slay—and mayhap many of mine. But before you can move my archers will feather their hearts."

She considered him, no longer mocking.

"Two of mine you slew long since, Cherkis," she said, slowly. "Therefore it is I am here."

"I know," he nodded heavily. "Yet now that is neither here nor there, Norhala. It was long since, and I have learned much during the years. I would have killed you too, Norhala, could I have found you. But now I would not do as then—quite differently would I do, Norhala; for I have learned much. I am sorry that those that you loved died as they did. I am in truth sorry!"

There was a curious lurking sardonicism in the words, an undertone of mockery. Was what he really meant that in those years he had learned to inflict greater agonies, more exquisite tortures? If so, Norhala apparently did not sense that interpretation. Indeed, she seemed to be interested, her wrath abating.

"No," the hoarse voice rumbled dispassionately. "None of that is important—now. YOU would have this man and girl. I hold them. They die if you stir a hand's breadth toward me. If they die, I prevail against you—for I have cheated you of what you desire. I win, Norhala, even though you slay me. That is all that is now important."

There was doubt upon Norhala's face and I caught a quick gleam of contemptuous triumph glint through the depths of the evil eyes.

"Empty will be your victory over me, Norhala," he said; then waited.

"What is your bargain?" she spoke hesitatingly; with a sinking of my heart I heard the doubt tremble in her throat.

"If you will go without further knocking upon my gates"—there was a satiric grimness in the phrase—"go when you have been given them, and pledge yourself never to return—you shall have them. If you will not, then they die."

"But what security, what hostages, do you ask?" Her eyes were troubled. "I cannot swear by your gods, Cherkis, for they are not my gods—in truth I, Norhala, have no gods. Why should I not say yes and take the two, then fall upon you and destroy—as you would do in my place, old wolf?"

"Norhala," he answered, "I ask nothing but your word. Do I not know those who bore you and the line from which they sprung? Was not always the word they gave kept till death—unbroken, inviolable? No need for vows to gods between you and me. Your word is holier than they—O glorious daughter of kings, princess royal!"

The great voice was harshly caressing; not obsequious, but as though he gave her as an equal her rightful honor. Her face softened; she considered him from eyes far less hostile.

A wholesome respect for this gross tyrant's mentality came to me; it did not temper, it heightened, the hatred I felt for him. But now I recognized the subtlety of his attack; realized that unerringly he had taken the only means by which he could have gained a hearing; have temporized. Could he win her with his guile?

"Is it not true?" There was a leonine purring in the question.

"It IS true!" she answered proudly. "Though why YOU should dwell upon this, Cherkis, whose word is steadfast as the running stream and whose promises are as lasting as its bubbles—why YOU should dwell on this I do not know."

"I have changed greatly, Princess, in the years since my great wickedness; I have learned much. He who speaks to you now is not he you were taught—and taught justly then—to hate."

"You may speak truth! Certainly you are not as I have pictured you." It was as though she were more than half convinced. "In this at least you do speak truth—that IF I promise I will go and molest you no more."

"Why go at all, Princess?" Quietly he asked the amazing question—then drew himself to his full height, threw wide his arms.

“Princess?” the great voice rumbled forth. “Nay—Queen! Why leave us again—Norhala the Queen? Are we not of your people? Am I not of your kin? Join your power with ours. What that war engine you ride may be, how built, I know not. But this I do know—that with our strengths joined we two can go forth from where I have dwelt so long, go forth into the forgotten world, eat its cities and rule.

“You shall teach our people to make these engines, Norhala, and we will make many of them. Queen Norhala—you shall wed my son Kulun, he who stands beside me. And while I live you shall rule with me, rule equally. And when I die you and Kulun shall rule.

“Thus shall our two royal lines be made one, the old feud wiped out, the long score be settled. Queen—wherever it is you dwell it comes to me that you have few men. Queen—you need men, many men and strong to follow you, men to gather the harvests of your power, men to bring to you the fruit of your smallest wish—young men and vigorous to amuse you.

“Let the past be forgotten—I too have wrongs to forget, O Queen. Come to us, Great One, with your power and your beauty. Teach us. Lead us. Return, and throned above your people rule the world!”

He ceased. Over the battlements, over the city, dropped a vast expectant silence—as though the city knew its fate was hanging upon the balance.

“No! No!” It was Ruth crying. “Do not trust him, Norhala! It's a trap! He shamed me—he tortured—”

Cherkis half turned; before he swung about I saw a hell shadow darken his face. Ventnor's hand thrust out, covered Ruth's mouth, choking her crying.

“Your son”—Norhala spoke swiftly; and back flashed the cruel face of Cherkis, devouring her with his eyes. “Your son—and Queenship here—and Empire of the World.” Her voice was rapt, thrilled. “All this you offer? Me—Norhala?”

“This and more!” The huge bulk of his body quivered with eagerness. “If it be your wish, O Queen, I, Cherkis, will step down from the throne for you and sit beneath your right hand, eager to do your bidding.”

A moment she studied him.

“Norhala,” I whispered, “do not do this thing. He thinks to gain your secrets.”

“Let my bridegroom stand forth that I may look upon him,” called Norhala.

Visibly Cherkis relaxed, as though a strain had been withdrawn. Between him and his crimson-clad son flashed a glance; it was as though a triumphant devil sped from them into each other's eyes.

I saw Ruth shrink into Ventnor's arms. Up from the wall rose a jubilant shouting, was caught by the inner battlements, passed on to the crowded terraces.

“Take Kulun,” it was Drake, pistol drawn and whispering across to me. “I'll handle Cherkis. And shoot straight.”

CHAPTER XXVI. THE VENGEANCE OF NORHALA

Norhala's hand that had gone from my wrist dropped down again; the other fell upon Drake's.

Kulun loosed his hood, let it fall about his shoulders.

He stepped forward, held out his arms to Norhala.

"A strong man!" she cried approvingly. "Hail—my bridegroom! But stay—stand back a moment. Stand beside that man for whom I came to Ruszark. I would see you together!"

Kulun's face darkened. But Cherkis smiled with evil understanding, shrugged his shoulders and whispered to him. Sullenly Kulun stepped back. The ring of the archers lowered their bows; they leaped to their feet and stood aside to let him pass.

Quick as a serpent's tongue a pyramid tipped tentacle flicked out beneath us. It darted through the broken circle of the bowmen.

It LICKED up Ruth and Ventnor and—Kulun!

Swiftly as it had swept forth it returned, coiled and dropped those two I loved at Norhala's feet.

It flashed back on high with the scarlet length of Cherkis's son sprawled along its angled end.

The great body of Cherkis seemed to wither.

Up from all the wall went a tempestuous sigh of horror.

Out rang the merciless chimes of Norhala's laughter.

"Tchai!" she cried. "Tchai! Fat fool there. Tchai—you Cherkis! Toad whose wits have sickened with your years!

"Did you think to catch me, Norhala, in your filthy web? Princess! Queen! Empress of Earth! Ho—old fox I have outplayed and beaten, what now have you to trade with Norhala?"

Mouth sagging open, eyes glaring, the tyrant slowly raised his arms—a suppliant.

"You would have back the bridegroom you gave me?" she laughed. "Take him, then."

Down swept the metal arm that held Kulun. The arm dropped Cherkis's son at Cherkis's feet; and as though Kulun had been a grape—it crushed him!

Before those who had seen could stir from their stupor the tentacle hovered over Cherkis, glaring down at the horror that had been his son.

It did not strike him—it drew him up to it as a magnet draws a pin.

And as the pin swings from the magnet when held suspended by the head, so swung the great body of Cherkis from the under side of the pyramid that held him. Hanging so he was carried toward us, came to a stop not ten feet from us—

Weird, weird beyond all telling was that scene—and would I had the power to make you who read see it as we did.

The animate, living Shape of metal on which we stood, with its forest of hammer-handed arms raised menacingly along its mile of spindled length; the great walls glistening with the armored hosts; the terraces of that fair and ancient city, their gardens and green groves and clustering red and yellow-roofed houses and temples and palaces; the swinging gross body of Cherkis in the clutch of the unseen grip of the tentacle, his grizzled hair touching the side of the pyramid that held him, his arms half outstretched, the gemmed cloak flapping like the wings of a jeweled bat, his white, malignant face in which the evil eyes were burning slits flaming hell's own blackest hatred; and beyond the city, from which pulsed almost visibly a vast and hopeless horror, the watching column—and over all this the palely radiant white sky under whose light the encircling cliffs were tremendous stony palettes splashed with a hundred pigments.

Norhala's laughter had ceased. Somberly she looked upon Cherkis, into the devil fires of his eyes.

“Cherkis!” she half whispered. “Now comes the end for you—and for all that is yours! But until the end's end you shall see.”

The hanging body was thrust forward; was thrust up; was brought down upon its feet on the upper plane of the prostrate pyramid tipping the metal arm that held him. For an instant he struggled to escape; I think he meant to hurl himself down upon Norhala, to kill her before he himself was slain.

If so, after one frenzied effort he realized the futility, for with a certain dignity he drew himself upright, turned his eyes toward the city.

Over that city a dreadful silence hung. It was as though it cowered, hid its face, was afraid to breathe.

"The end!" murmured Norhala.

There was a quick trembling through the Metal Thing. Down swung its forest of sledges. Beneath the blow down fell the smitten walls, shattered, crumbling, and with it glittering like shining flies in a dust storm fell the armored men.

Through that mile-wide breach and up to the inner barrier I glimpsed confusion chaotic. And again I say it—they were no cowards, those men of Cherkis. From the inner battlements flew clouds of arrows, of huge stones—as uselessly as before.

Then out from the opened gates poured regiments of horsemen, brandishing javelins and great maces, and shouting fiercely as they drove down upon each end of the Metal Shape. Under cover of their attack I saw cloaked riders spurring their ponies across the plain to shelter of the cliff walls, to the chance of hiding places within them. Women and men of the rich, the powerful, flying for safety; after them ran and scattered through the fields of grain a multitude on foot.

The ends of the spindle drew back before the horsemen's charge, broadening as they went—like the heads of monstrous cobras withdrawing into their hoods. Abruptly, with a lightning velocity, these broadenings expanded into immense lunettes, two tremendous curving and crablike claws. Their tips flung themselves past the racing troops; then like gigantic pincers began to contract.

Of no avail now was it for the horsemen to halt dragging their mounts on their haunches, or to turn to fly. The ends of the lunettes had met, the pincer tips had closed. The mounted men were trapped within half-mile-wide circles. And in upon man and horse their living walls marched. Within those enclosures of the doomed began a frantic milling—I shut my eyes—

There was a dreadful screaming of horses, a shrieking of men. Then silence.

Shuddering, I looked. Where the mounted men had been was—nothing.

Nothing? There were two great circular spaces whose floors were glistening, wetly red. Fragments of man or horse—there was none. They had been crushed into—what was it Norhala had promised—had been stamped into the rock beneath the feet of her—servants.

Sick, I looked away and stared at a Thing that writhed and undulated over the plain; a prodigious serpentine Shape of cubes and spheres linked and studded thick with the spikes of the pyramid. Through the fields, over the plain its coils flashed.

Playfully it sped and twisted among the fugitives, crushing them, tossing them aside broken, gliding over them. Some there were who hurled themselves upon it in impotent despair, some who knelt before it, praying. On rolled the metal convolutions, inexorable.

Within my vision's range there were no more fugitives. Around a corner of the broken battlements raced the serpent Shape. Where it had writhed was now no waving grain, no trees, no green thing. There was only smooth rock upon which here and there red smears glistened wetly.

Afar there was a crying, in its wake a rumbling. It was the column, it came to me, at work upon the further battlements. As though the sound had been a signal the spindle trembled; up we were thrust another hundred feet or more. Back dropped the host of brandished arms, threaded themselves into the parent bulk.

Right and left of us the spindle split into scores of fissures. Between these fissures the Metal Things that made up each now dissociate and shapeless mass geysered; block and sphere and tetrahedron spike spun and swirled. There was an instant of formlessness.

Then right and left of us stood scores of giant, grotesque warriors. Their crests were fully fifty feet below our living platform. They stood upon six immense, columnar stilts. These sextuple legs supported a hundred feet above their bases a huge and globular body formed of clusters of the spheres. Out from each of these bodies that were at one and the same time trunks and heads, sprang half a score

of colossal arms shaped like flails; like spike-studded girders, Titanic battle maces, Cyclopean sledges.

From legs and trunks and arms the tiny eyes of the Metal Hordes flashed, exulting.

There came from them, from the Thing we rode as well, a chorus of thin and eager wailings and pulsed through all that battle-line, a jubilant throbbing.

Then with a rhythmic, JOCUND stride they leaped upon the city.

Under the mallets of the smiting arms the inner battlements fell as under the hammers of a thousand metal Thors. Over their fragments and the armored men who fell with them strode the Things, grinding stone and man together as we passed.

All of the terraced city except the side hidden by the mount lay open to my gaze. In that brief moment of pause I saw crazed crowds battling in narrow streets, trampling over mounds of the fallen, surging over barricades of bodies, clawing and tearing at each other in their flight.

There was a wide, stepped street of gleaming white stone that climbed like an immense stairway straight up the slope to that broad plaza at the top where clustered the great temples and palaces—the Acropolis of the city. Into it the streets of the terraces flowed, each pouring out upon it a living torrent, tumultuous with tuliped, sparkling little waves, the gay coverings and the arms and armor of Ruszark's desperate thousands seeking safety at the shrines of their gods.

Here great carven arches arose; there slender, exquisite towers capped with red gold—there was a street of colossal statues, another over which dozens of graceful, fretted bridges threw their spans from feathery billows of flowering trees; there were gardens gay with blossoms in which fountains sparkled, green groves; thousands upon thousands of bright multicolored pennants, banners, fluttered.

A fair, a lovely city was Cherkis's stronghold of Ruszark.

Its beauty filled the eyes; out from it streamed the fragrance of its gardens—the voice of its agony was that of the souls in Dis.

The row of destroying shapes lengthened, each huge warrior of metal drawing far apart from its mates. They flexed their manifold arms, shadow boxed—grotesquely, dreadfully.

Down struck the flails, the sledges. Beneath the blows the buildings burst like eggshells, their fragments burying the throngs fighting for escape in the thoroughfares that threaded them. Over their ruins we moved.

Down and ever down crashed the awful sledges. And ever under them the city crumbled.

There was a spider Shape that crawled up the wide stairway hammering into the stone those who tried to flee before it.

Stride by stride the Destroying Things ate up the city.

I felt neither wrath nor pity. Through me beat a jubilant roaring pulse—as though I were a shouting corpuscle of the rushing hurricane, as though I were one of the hosts of smiting spirits of the bellowing typhoon.

Through this stole another thought—vague, unfamiliar, yet seemingly of truth's own essence. Why, I wondered, had I never recognized this before? Why had I never known that these green forms called trees were but ugly, unsymmetrical excrescences? That these high projections of towers, these buildings were deformities?

That these four-pronged, moving little shapes that screamed and ran were—hideous?

They must be wiped out! All this misshapen, jumbled, inharmonious ugliness must be wiped out! It must be ground down to smooth unbroken planes, harmonious curvings, shapeliness—harmonies of arc and line and angle!

Something deep within me fought to speak—fought to tell me that this thought was not human thought, not my thought—that it was the reflected thought of the Metal Things!

It told me—and fiercely it struggled to make me realize what it was that it told. Its insistence was borne upon little despairing, rhythmic beatings—throbbings that were like the muffled sobbings of the drums of grief. Louder, closer came the throbbing; clearer with it my perception of the inhumanness of my thought.

The drum beat tapped at my humanity, became a dolorous knocking at my heart.

It was the sobbing of Cherkis!

The gross face was shrunken, the cheeks sagging in folds of woe; cruelty and wickedness were wiped from it; the evil in the eyes had

been washed out by tears. Eyes streaming, bull throat and barrel chest racked by his sobbing, he watched the passing of his people and his city.

And relentlessly, coldly, Norhala watched him—as though loath to lose the faintest shadow of his agony.

Now I saw we were close to the top of the mount. Packed between us and the immense white structures that crowned it were thousands of the people. They fell on their knees before us, prayed to us. They tore at each other, striving to hide themselves from us in the mass that was themselves. They beat against the barred doors of the sanctuaries; they climbed the pillars; they swarmed over the golden roofs.

There was a moment of chaos—a chaos of which we were the heart. Then temple and palace cracked, burst; were shattered; fell. I caught glimpses of gleaming sculptures, glitterings of gold and of silver, flashing of gems, shimmering of gorgeous draperies—under them a weltering of men and women.

We closed down upon them—over them!

The dreadful sobbing ceased. I saw the head of Cherkis swing heavily upon a shoulder; the eyes closed.

The Destroying Things touched. Their flailing arms coiled back, withdrew into their bodies. They joined, forming for an instant a tremendous hollow pillar far down in whose center we stood. They parted; shifted in shape? rolled down the mount over the ruins like a widening wave—crushing into the stone all over which they passed.

Afar away I saw the gleaming serpent still at play—still writhing along, still obliterating the few score scattered fugitives that some way, somehow, had slipped by the Destroying Things.

We halted. For one long moment Norhala looked upon the drooping body of him upon whom she had let fall this mighty vengeance.

Then the metal arm that held Cherkis whirled. Thrown from it, the cloaked form flew like a great blue bat. It fell upon the flattened mound that had once been the proud crown of his city. A blue blot upon desolation the broken body of Cherkis lay.

A black speck appeared high in the sky; grew fast—the lammergeier.

“I have left carrion for you—after all!” cried Norhala.

With an ebon swirling of wings the vulture dropped beside the blue heap—thrust in it its beak.

CHAPTER XXVII. “THE DRUMS OF DESTINY”

Slowly we descended that mount of desolation; lingeringly, as though the brooding eyes of Norhala were not yet sated with destruction. Of human life, of green life, of life of any kind there was none.

Man and tree, woman and flower, babe and bud, palace, temple and home—Norhala had stamped flat. She had crushed them within the rock—even as she had promised.

The tremendous tragedy had absorbed my every faculty; I had had no time to think of my companions; I had forgotten them. Now in the painful surges of awakening realization, of full human understanding of that inhuman annihilation, I turned to them for strength. Faintly I wondered again at Ruth's scantiness of garb, her more than half nudity; dwelt curiously upon the red brand across Ventnor's forehead.

In his eyes and in Drake's I saw reflected the horror I knew was in my own. But in the eyes of Ruth was none of this—sternly, coldly triumphant, indifferent to its piteousness as Norhala herself, she scanned the waste that less than an hour since had been a place of living beauty.

I felt a shock of repulsion. After all, those who had been destroyed so ruthlessly could not ALL have been wholly evil. Yet mother and blossoming maid, youth and oldster, all the pageant of humanity within the great walls were now but lines within the stone. According to their different lights, it came to me, there had been in Ruszark no greater number of the wicked than one could find in any great city of our own civilization.

From Norhala, of course, I looked for no perception of any of this. But from Ruth—

My reaction grew; the pity long withheld racing through me linked with a burning anger, a hatred for this woman who had been the directing soul of that catastrophe.

My gaze fell again upon the red brand. I saw that it was a deep indentation as though a thong had been twisted around Ventnor's

head biting the bone. There was dried blood on the edges, a double ring of swollen white flesh rimming the cincture. It was the mark of—torture!

"Martin," I cried. "That ring? What did they do to you?"

"They waked me with that," he answered quietly. "I suppose I ought to be grateful—although their intentions were not exactly—therapeutic—"

"They tortured him," Ruth's voice was tense, bitter; she spoke in Persian—for Norhala's benefit I thought then, not guessing a deeper reason. "They tortured him. They gave him agony until he—returned. And they promised him other agonies that would make him pray long for death.

"And me—me"—she raised little clenched hands—"me they stripped like a slave. They led me through the city and the people mocked me. They took me before that swine Norhala has punished—and stripped me before him—like a slave. Before my eyes they tortured my brother. Norhala—they were evil, all evil! Norhala—you did well to slay them!"

She caught the woman's hands, pressed close to her. Norhala gazed at her from great gray eyes in which the wrath was dying, into which the old tranquillity, the old serenity was flowing. And when she spoke the golden voice held more than returning echoes of the far-away, faint chimings.

"It is done," she said. "And it was well done—sister. Now you and I shall dwell together in peace—sister. Or if there be those in the world from which you came that you would have slain, then you and I shall go forth with our companies and stamp them out—even as I did these."

My heart stopped beating—for from the depths of Ruth's eyes shining shadows were rising, wraiths answering Norhala's calling; and, as they rose, steadily they drew life from the clear radiance summoning—drew closer to the semblance of that tranquil spirit which her vengeance had banished but that had now returned to its twin thrones of Norhala's eyes.

And at last it was twin sister of Norhala who looked upon her from the face of Ruth!

The white arms of the woman encircled her; the glorious head bent over her; flaming tresses mingled with tender brown curls.

"Sister!" she whispered. "Little sister! These men you shall have as long as it pleases you—to do with as you will. Or if it is your wish they shall go back to their world and I will guard them to its gates.

"But you and I, little sister, will dwell together—in the vastnesses—in the peace. Shall it not be so?"

With no faltering, with no glance toward us three—lover, brother, old friend—Ruth crept closer to her, rested her head upon the virginal, royal breasts.

"It shall be so!" she murmured. "Sister—it shall be so. Norhala—I am tired. Norhala—I have seen enough of men."

An ecstasy of tenderness, a flame of unearthly rapture, trembled over the woman's wondrous face. Hungrily, defiantly, she pressed the girl to her; the stars in the lucid heavens of her eyes were soft and gentle and caressing.

"Ruth!" cried Drake—and sprang toward them. She paid no heed; and even as he leaped he was caught, whirled back against us.

"Wait," said Ventnor, and caught him by the arm as wrathfully, blindedly, he strove against the force that held him. "Wait. No use—now."

There was a curious understanding in his voice—a curious sympathy, too, in the patient, untroubled gaze that dwelt upon his sister and this weirdly exquisite woman who held her.

"Wait!" exclaimed Drake. "Wait—hell! The damned witch is stealing her away from us!"

Again he threw himself forward; recoiled as though swept back by an invisible arm; fell against us and was clasped and held by Ventnor. And as he struggled the Thing we rode halted. Like metal waves back into it rushed the enigmatic billows that had washed over the fragments of the city.

We were lifted; between us and the woman and girl a cleft appeared; it widened into a rift. It was as though Norhala had decreed it as a symbol of this her second victory—or had set it between us as a barrier.

Wider grew the rift. Save for the bridge of our voices it separated us from Ruth as though she stood upon another world.

Higher we rose; the three of us now upon the flat top of a tower upon whose counterpart fifty feet away and facing the homeward path, Ruth and Norhala stood with white arms interlaced.

The serpent shape flashed toward us; it vanished beneath, merging into the waiting Thing.

Then slowly the Thing began to move; quietly it glided to the chasm it had blasted in the cliff wall. The shadow of those walls fell upon us. As one we looked back; as one we searched out the patch of blue with the black blot at its breast.

We found it; then the precipices hid it. Silently we streamed through the chasm, through the canyon and the tunnel—speaking no word, Drake's eyes fixed with bitter hatred upon Norhala, Ventnor brooding upon her always with that enigmatic sympathy. We passed between the walls of the further cleft; stood for an instant at the brink of the green forest.

There came to us as though from immeasurable distances, a faint, sustained thrumming—like the beating of countless muffled drums. The Thing that carried us trembled—the sound died away. The Thing quieted; it began its steady, effortless striding through the crowding trees—but now with none of that speed with which it had come, spurred forward by Norhala's awakened hate.

Ventnor stirred; broke the silence. And now I saw how wasted was his body, how sharpened his face; almost ethereal; purged not only by suffering but by, it came to me, some strange knowledge.

“No use, Drake,” he said dreamily. “All this is now on the knees of the gods. And whether those gods are humanity's or whether they are—Gods of Metal—I do not know.

“But this I do know—only one way or another can the balance fall; and if it be one way, then you and we shall have Ruth back. And if it falls the other way—then there will be little need for us to care. For man will be done!”

“Martin! What do you mean?”

“It is the crisis,” he answered. “We can do nothing, Goodwin—nothing. Whatever is to be steps forth now from the womb of Destiny.”

Again there came that distant rolling—louder, now. Again the Thing trembled.

“The drums,” whispered Ventnor. “The drums of destiny. What is it they are heralding? A new birth of Earth and the passing of man? A new child to whom shall be given dominion—nay, to whom has been given dominion? Or is it—taps—for Them?”

The drumming died as I listened—fearfully. About us was only the swishing, the sighing of the falling trees beneath the tread of the Thing. Motionless stood Norhala; and as motionless Ruth.

“Martin,” I cried once more, a dreadful doubt upon me. “Martin—what do you mean?”

“Whence did—They—come?” His voice was clear and calm, the eyes beneath the red brand clear and quiet, too. “Whence did They come—these Things that carry us? That strode like destroying angels over Cherkis's city? Are they spawn of Earth—as we are? Or are they foster children—changelings from another star?

“These creatures that when many still are one—that when one still are many. Whence did They come? What are They?”

He looked down upon the cubes that held us; their hosts of tiny eyes shone up at him, enigmatically—as though they heard and understood.

“I do not forget,” he said. “At least not all do I forget of what I saw during that time when I seemed an atom outside space—as I told you, or think I told you, speaking with unthinkable effort through lips that seemed eternities away from me, the atom, who strove to open them.

“There were three—visions, revelations—I know not what to call them. And though each seemed equally real, of two of them, only one, I think, can be true; and of the third—that may some time be true but surely is not yet.”

Through the air came a louder drum roll—in it something ominous, something sinister. It swelled to a crescendo; abruptly ceased. And now I saw Norhala raise her head; listen.

“I saw a world, a vast world, Goodwin, marching stately through space. It was no globe—it was a world of many facets, of smooth and polished planes; a huge blue jewel world, dimly luminous; a crystal world cut out from Aether. A geometric thought of the Great Cause, of God, if you will, made material. It was airless, waterless, sunless.

“I seemed to draw closer to it. And then I saw that over every facet patterns were traced; gigantic symmetrical designs; mathematical hieroglyphs. In them I read unthinkable calculations, formulas of interwoven universes, arithmetical progressions of armies of stars, pandects of the motions of the suns. In the patterns was an appalling harmony—as though all the laws from those which guide the atom to those which direct the cosmos were there resolved into completeness—totalled.

“The faceted world was like a cosmic abacist, tallying as it marched the errors of the infinite.

“The patterned symbols constantly changed form. I drew nearer—the symbols were alive. They were, in untold numbers—These!”

He pointed to the Thing that bore us.

“I was swept back; looked again upon it from afar. And a fantastic notion came to me—fantasy it was, of course, yet built I know around a nucleus of strange truth. It was”—his tone was half whimsical, half apologetic—“it was that this jeweled world was ridden by some mathematical god, driving it through space, noting occasionally with amused tolerance the very bad arithmetic of another Deity the reverse of mathematical—a more or less haphazard Deity, the god, in fact, of us and the things we call living.

“It had no mission; it wasn't at all out to do any reforming; it wasn't in the least concerned in rectifying any of the inaccuracies of the Other. Only now and then it took note of the deplorable differences between the worlds it saw and its own impeccably ordered and tidy temple with its equally tidy servitors.

“Just an itinerant demiurge of supergeometry riding along through space on its perfectly summed-up world; master of all celestial mechanics; its people independent of all that complex chemistry and labor for equilibrium by which we live; needing neither air nor water, heeding neither heat nor cold; fed with the magnetism of interstellar space and stopping now and then to banquet off the energy of some great sun.”

A thrill of amazement passed through me; fantasy all this might be but—how, if so, had he gotten that last thought? He had not seen, as

we had, the orgy in the Hall of the Cones, the prodigious feeding of the Metal Monster upon our sun.

"That passed," he went on, unnoticing. "I saw vast caverns filled with the Things; working, growing, multiplying. In caverns of our Earth—the fruit of some unguessed womb? I do not know.

"But in those caverns, under countless orbs of many colored lights"—again the thrill of amaze shook me—"they grew. It came to me that they were reaching out toward sunlight and the open. They burst into it—into yellow, glowing sunlight. Ours? I do not know. And that picture passed."

His voice deepened.

"There came a third vision. I saw our Earth—I knew, Goodwin, indisputably, unmistakably that it was our earth. But its rolling hills were leveled, its mountains were ground and shaped into cold and polished symbols—geometric, fashioned.

"The seas were fettered, gleaming like immense jewels in patterned settings of crystal shores. The very Polar ice was chiseled. On the ordered plains were traced the hieroglyphs of the faceted world. And on all Earth, Goodwin, there was no green life, no city, no trace of man. On this Earth that had been ours were only—These.

"Visioning!" he said. "Don't think that I accept them in their entirety. Part truth, part illusion—the groping mind dazzled with light of unfamiliar truths and making pictures from half light and half shadow to help it understand.

"But still—SOME truth in them. How much I do not know. But this I do know—that last vision was of a cataclysm whose beginnings we face now—this very instant."

The picture flashed behind my own eyes—of the walled city, its thronging people, its groves and gardens, its science and its art; of the Destroying Shapes trampling it flat—and then the dreadful, desolate mount.

And suddenly I saw that mount as Earth—the city as Earth's cities—its gardens and groves as Earth's fields and forests—and the vanished people of Cherkis seemed to expand into all humanity.

"But Martin," I stammered, fighting against choking, intolerable terror, "there was something else. Something of the Keeper of the Cones and of our striking through the sun to destroy the

Things—something of them being governed by the same laws that govern us and that if they broke them they must fall. A hope—a PROMISE, that they would NOT conquer."

"I remember," he replied, "but not clearly. There WAS something—a shadow upon them, a menace. It was a shadow that seemed to be born of our own world—some threatening spirit of earth hovering over them.

"I cannot remember; it eludes me. Yet it is because I remember but a little of it that I say those drums may not be—taps—for us."

As though his words had been a cue, the sounds again burst forth—no longer muffled nor faint. They roared; they seemed to pelt through air and drop upon us; they beat about our ears with thunderous tattoo like covered caverns drummed upon by Titans with trunks of great trees.

The drumming did not die; it grew louder, more vehement; defiant and deafening. Within the Thing under us a mighty pulse began to throb, accelerating rapidly to the rhythm of that clamorous roll.

I saw Norhala draw herself up, sharply; stand listening and alert. Under me, the throbbing turned to an uneasy churning, a ferment.

"Drums?" muttered Drake. "THEY'RE no drums. It's drum fire. It's like a dozen Marnes, a dozen Verduns. But where could batteries like those come from?"

"Drums," whispered Ventnor. "They ARE drums. The drums of Destiny!"

Louder the roaring grew. Now it was a tremendous rhythmic cannonading. The Thing halted. The tower that upheld Ruth and Norhala swayed, bent over the gap between us, touched the top on which we rode.

Gently the two were plucked up; swiftly they were set beside us.

Came a shrill, keen wailing—louder than ever I had heard before. There was an earthquake trembling; a maelstrom swirling in which we spun; a swift sinking.

The Thing split in two. Up before us rose a stupendous, stepped pyramid; little smaller it was than that which Cheops built to throw its shadows across holy Nile. Into it streamed, over it clicked, score

upon score of cubes, building it higher and higher. It lurched forward—away from us.

From Norhala came a single cry—resonant, blaring like a wrathful, golden trumpet.

The speeding shape halted, hesitated; it seemed about to return. Crashed down upon us an abrupt crescendo of the distant drumming; peremptory, commanding. The shape darted forward; raced away crushing to straw the trees beneath it in a full quarter-mile-wide swath.

Great gray eyes wide, filled with incredulous wonder, stunned disbelief, Norhala for an instant faltered. Then out of her white throat, through her red lips pelted a tempest of staccato buglings.

Under them what was left of the Thing leaped, tore on. Norhala's flaming hair crackled and streamed; about her body of milk and pearl—about Ruth's creamy skin—a radiant nimbus began to glow.

In the distance I saw a sapphire spark; knew it for Norhala's home. Not far from it now was the rushing pyramid—and it came to me that within that shape was strangely neither globe nor pyramid. Nor except for the trembling cubes that made the platform on which we stood, did the shrunken Thing carrying us hold any unit of the Metal Monster except its spheres and tetrahedrons—at least within its visible bulk.

The sapphire spark had grown to a glimmering azure marble. Steadily we gained upon the pyramid. Never for an instant ceased that scourging hail of notes from Norhala—never for an instant lessened the drumming clamor that seemed to try to smother them.

The sapphire marble became a sapphire ball, a great globe. I saw the Thing we sought to join lift itself into a prodigious pillar; the pillar's base thrust forth stilts; upon them the Thing stepped over the blue dome of Norhala's house.

The blue bubble was close; now it curved below us. Gently we were lifted down; were set before its portal. I looked up at the bulk that had carried us.

I had been right—built it was only of globe and pyramid; an inconceivably grotesque shape, it hung over us.

Throughout the towering Shape was awful movement; its units writhed within it. Then it was lost to sight in the mists through which the Thing we had pursued had gone.

In Norhala's face as she watched it go was a dismay, a poignant uncertainty, that held in it something indescribably pitiful.

"I am afraid!" I heard her whisper.

She tightened her grasp upon dreaming Ruth; motioned us to go within. We passed, silently; behind us she came, followed by three of the great globes, by a pair of her tetrahedrons.

Beside a pile of the silken stuffs she halted. The girl's eyes dwelt upon hers trustingly.

"I am afraid!" whispered Norhala again. "Afraid—for you!"

Tenderly she looked down upon her, the galaxies of stars in her eyes soft and tremulous.

"I am afraid, little sister," she whispered for the third time. "Not yet can you go as I do—among the fires." She hesitated. "Rest here until I return. I shall leave these to guard you and obey you."

She motioned to the five shapes. They ranged themselves about Ruth. Norhala kissed her upon both brown eyes.

"Sleep till I return," she murmured.

She swept from the chamber—with never a glance for us three. I heard a little wailing chorus without, fast dying into silence.

Spheres and pyramids twinkled at us, guarding the silken pile whereon Ruth lay asleep—like some enchanted princess.

Beat down upon the blue globe like hollow metal worlds, beaten and shrieking.

The drums of Destiny!

The drums of Doom!

Beating taps for the world of men?

CHAPTER XXVIII. THE FRENZY OF RUTH

For many minutes we stood silent, in the shadowy chamber, listening, each absorbed in his own thoughts. The thunderous drumming was continuous; sometimes it faded into a background for clattering storms as of thousands of machine guns, thousands of riveters at work at once upon a thousand metal frameworks; sometimes it was nearly submerged beneath splitting crashes as of meeting meteors of hollow steel.

But always the drumming persisted, rhythmic, thunderous. Through it all Ruth slept, undisturbed, cheek pillowed in one rounded arm, the two great pyramids erect behind her, watchful; a globe at her feet, a globe at her head, the third sphere poised between her and us, and, like the pyramids—watchful.

What was happening out there—over the edge of the canyon, beyond the portal of the cliffs, behind the veils, in the Pit of the Metal Monster? What was the message of the roaring drums? What the rede of their clamorous runes?

Ventnor stepped by the sentinel globe, bent over the tranced girl. Sphere nor pointed pair stirred; only they watched him—like a palpable thing one felt their watchfulness. He listened to her heart, caught up a wrist, took note of her pulse of life. He drew a deep breath, stood upright, nodded reassuringly.

Abruptly Drake turned, walked out through the open portal, his strain and a very deep anxiety written plainly in deep lines that ran from nostrils to firm young mouth.

“Just went out to look for the pony,” he muttered when he returned. “It's safe. I was afraid it had been stepped on. It's getting dusk. There's a big light down the canyon—over in the valley.”

Ventnor drew back past the globe; rejoined us.

The blue bower trembled under a gust of sound. Ruth stirred; her brows knitted; her hands clenched. The sphere that stood before her spun on its axis, swept up to the globe at her head, glided from it to the globe at her feet—as though whispering. Ruth moaned—her body bent upright, swayed rigidly. Her eyes opened; they stared through us as though upon some dreadful vision; and strangely was it as

though she were seeing with another's eyes, were reflecting another's sufferings.

The globes at her feet and at her head swirled out, clustering against the third sphere—three weird shapes in silent consultation. On Ventnor's face I saw pity—and a vast relief. With shocked amaze I realized that Ruth's agony—for in agony she clearly was—was calling forth in him elation. He spoke—and I knew why.

"Norhala!" he whispered. "She is seeing with Norhala's eyes—feeling what Norhala feels. It's not going well with—That—out there. If we dared leave Ruth—could only, see—"

Ruth leaped to her feet; cried out—a golden bugling that might have been Norhala's own wrathful trumpet notes. Instantly the two pyramids flamed open, became two gleaming stars that bathed her in violet radiance. Beneath their upper tips I saw the blasting ovals glitter—menacingly.

The girl glared at us—more brilliant grew the glittering ovals as though their lightnings trembled on their lips.

"Ruth!" called Ventnor softly.

A shadow softened the intolerable, hard brilliancy of the brown eyes. In them something struggled to arise, fighting its way to the surface like some drowning human thing.

It sank back—upon her face dropped a cloud of heartbreak, appalling woe; the despair of a soul that, having withdrawn all faith in its own kind to rest all faith, as it thought, on angels—sees that faith betrayed.

There stared upon us a stripped spirit, naked and hopeless and terrible.

Despairing, raging, she screamed once more. The central globe swam to her; it raised her upon its back; glided to the doorway. Upon it she stood poised like some youthful, anguished Victory—a Victory who faced and knew she faced destroying defeat; poised upon that enigmatic orb on bare slender feet, one sweet breast bare, hands upraised, virginally archaic, nothing about her of the Ruth we knew.

"Ruth!" cried Drake; despair as great as that upon her face was in his voice. He sprang before the globe that held her; barred its way.

For an instant the Thing paused—and in that instant the human soul of the girl rushed back.

"No!" she cried. "No!"

A weird call issued from the white lips—stumbling, uncertain, as though she who sent it forth herself wondered whence it sprang. Abruptly the angry stars closed. The three globes spun—doubting, puzzled! Again she called—now a tremulous, halting cadence. She was lifted; dropped gently to her feet.

For an instant the globes and pyramids whirled and danced before her—then sped away through the portal.

Ruth swayed, sobbing. Then as though drawn, she ran to the doorway, fled through it. As one we sprang after her. Rods ahead her white body flashed, speeding toward the Pit. Like fleet-footed Atalanta she fled—and far, far behind us was the blue bower, the misty barrier of the veils close, when Drake with a last desperate burst reached her side, gripped her. Down the two fell, rolling upon the smooth roadway. Silently she fought, biting, tearing at Drake, struggling to escape.

"Quick!" gasped Ventnor, stretching out to me an arm. "Cut off the sleeve. Quick!"

Unquestioningly, I drew my knife, ripped the garment at the shoulder. He snatched the sleeve, knelt at Ruth's head; rapidly he crumpled an end, thrust it roughly into her mouth; tied it fast, gagging her.

"Hold her!" he ordered Drake; and with a sob of relief sprang up. The girl's eyes blazed at him, filled with hate.

"Cut that other sleeve," he said; and when I had done so, he knelt again, pinned Ruth down with a knee at her throat, turned her over and knotted her hands behind her. She ceased struggling; gently now he drew up the curly head; swung her upon her back.

"Hold her feet." He nodded to Drake, who caught the slender bare ankles in his hands.

She lay there, helpless, being unable to use her hands or feet.

"Too little Ruth, and too much Norhala," said Ventnor, looking up at me. "If she'd only thought to cry out! She could have brought a regiment of those Things down to blast us. And would—if she HAD thought. You don't think THAT is Ruth, do you?"

He pointed to the pallid face glaring at him, the eyes from which cold fires flamed.

“No, you don't!” He caught Drake by the shoulder, sent him spinning a dozen feet away. “Damn it, Drake—don't you understand!”

For suddenly Ruth's eyes softened; she had turned them on Dick pitifully, appealingly—and he had loosed her ankles, had leaned forward as though to draw away the band that covered her lips.

“Your gun,” whispered Ventnor to me; before I had moved he had snatched the automatic from my holster; had covered Drake with it.

“Drake,” he said, “stand where you are. If you take another step toward this girl I'll shoot you—by God, I will!”

Drake halted, shocked amazement in his face; I myself felt resentful, wondering at his outburst.

“But it's hurting her,” he muttered, Ruth's eyes, soft and pleading, still dwelt upon him.

“Hurting her!” exclaimed Ventnor. “Man—she's my sister! I know what I'm doing. Can't you see? Can't you see how little of Ruth is in that body there—how little of the girl you love? How or why I don't know—but that it is so I DO know. Drake—have you forgotten how Norhala beguiled Cherkis? I want my sister back. I'm helping her to get back. Now let be. I know what I'm doing. Look at her!”

We looked. In the face that glared up at Ventnor was nothing of Ruth—even as he had said. There was the same cold, awesome wrath that had rested upon Norhala's as she watched Cherkis weep over the eating up of his city. Swiftly came a change—like the sudden smoothing out of the rushing waves of a hill-locked, wind-lashed lake.

The face was again Ruth's face—and Ruth's alone; the eyes were Ruth's eyes—supplicating, adjuring.

“Ruth!” Ventnor cried. “While you can hear—am I not right?”

She nodded vigorously, sternly; she was lost, hidden once more.

“You see.” He turned to us grimly.

A shattering shaft of light flashed upon the veils; almost pierced them. An avalanche of sound passed high above us. Yet now I noted that where we stood the clamor was lessened, muffled. Of course, it came to me, it was the veils.

I wondered why—for whatever the quality of the radiant mists, their purpose certainly had to do with concentration of the magnetic flux. The deadening of the noise must be accidental, could have nothing to do with their actual use; for sound is an air vibration solely. No—it must be a secondary effect. The Metal Monster was as heedless of clamor as it was of heat or cold—

"We've got to see," Ventnor broke the chain of thought. "We've got to get through and see what's happening. Win or lose—we've got to KNOW."

"Cut off your sleeve, as I did," he motioned to Drake. "Tie her ankles. We'll carry her."

Quickly it was done. Ruth's light body swinging between brother and lover, we moved forward into the mists; we crept cautiously through their dead silences.

Passed out and fell back into them from a searing chaos of light, chaotic tumult.

From the slackened grip of Ventnor and Drake the body of Ruth dropped while we three stood blinded, deafened, fighting for recovery. Ruth twisted, rolled toward the brink; Ventnor threw himself upon her, held her fast.

Dragging her, crawling on our knees, we crept forward; we stopped when the thinning of the mists permitted us to see through them yet still interposed a curtaining which, though tenuous, dimmed the intolerable brilliancy that filled the Pit, muffled its din to a degree we could bear.

I peered through them—and nerve and muscle were locked in the grip of a paralyzing awe. I felt then as one would feel set close to warring regiments of stars, made witness to the death-throes of a universe, or swept through space and held above the whirling coils of Andromeda's nebula to watch its birth agonies of nascent suns.

These are no figures of speech, no hyperboles—speck as our whole planet would be in Andromeda's vast loom, pinprick as was the Pit to the cyclone craters of our own sun, within the cliff-cupped walls of the valley was a tangible, struggling living force akin to that which dwells within the nebula and the star; a cosmic spirit transcending all dimensions and thrusting its confines out into the infinite; a sentient emanation of the infinite itself.

Nor was its voice less unearthly. It used the shell of the earth valley for its trumpetings, its clangors—but as one hears in the murmurings of the fluted conch the great voice of ocean, its whispering and its roarings, so here in the clamorous shell of the Pit echoed the tremendous voices of that illimitable sea which laps the shores of the countless suns.

I looked upon a mighty whirlpool miles and miles wide. It whirled with surges whose racing crests were smiting incandescences; it was threaded with a spindrift of lightnings; it was trodden by dervish mists of molten flame thrust through with forests of lances of living light. It cast a cadent spray high to the heavens.

Over it the heavens glittered as though they were a shield held by fearful gods. Through the maelstrom staggered a mountainous bulk; a gleaming leviathan of pale blue metal caught in the swirling tide of some incredible volcano; a huge ark of metal breasting a deluge of flame.

And the drumming we heard as of hollow beaten metal worlds, the shouting tempests of cannonading stars, was the breaking of these incandescent crests, the falling of the lightning spindrift, the rhythmic impact of the lanced rays upon the glimmering mountain that reeled and trembled as they struck it.

The reeling mountain, the struggling leviathan, was—the City!

It was the mass of the Metal Monster itself, guarded by, stormed by, its own legions that though separate from it were still as much of it as were the cells that formed the skin of its walls, its carapace.

It was the Metal Monster tearing, rending, fighting for, battling against—itself.

Mile high as when I had first beheld it was the inexplicable body that held the great heart of the cones into which had been drawn the magnetic cataracts from our sun; that held too the smaller hearts of the lesser cones, the workshops, the birth chamber and manifold other mysteries unguessed and unseen. By a full fourth had its base been shrunken.

Ranged in double line along the side turned toward us were hundreds of dread forms—Shapes that in their intensity bore down upon, oppressed with a nightmare weight, the consciousness.

Rectangular, upon their outlines no spike of pyramid, no curve of globe showing, uncompromisingly ponderous, they upthrust. Upon the tops of the first rank were enormous masses, sledge shaped—like those metal fists that had battered down the walls of Cherkis's city but to them as the human hand is to the paw of the dinosaur.

Conceive this—conceive these Shapes as animate and flexible; beating down with the prodigious mallets, smashing from side to side as though the tremendous pillars that held them were thousand jointed upright pistons; that as closely as I can present it in images of things we know is the picture of the Hammering Things.

Behind them stood a second row, high as they and as angular. From them extended scores of girdered arms. These were thickly studded with the flaming cruciform shapes, the opened cubes gleaming with their angry flares of reds and smoky yellows. From the tentacles of many swung immense shields like those which ringed the hall of the great cones.

And as the sledges beat, ever over their bent heads poured from the crosses a flood of crimson lightnings. Out of the concave depths of the shields whipped lashes of blinding flame. With ropes of fire they knouted the Things the sledges struck, the sullen crimson levins blasted.

Now I could see the Shapes that attacked. Grotesque; spined and tusked, spiked and antlered, wenned and breasted; as chimerically angled, cusped and cornute as though they were the superangled, supercornute gods of the cusped and angled gods of the Javanese, they strove against the sledge-headed and smiting, the multiarmed and blasting square towers.

High as them, as huge as they, incomparably fantastic, in dozens of shifting forms they battled.

More than a mile from the stumbling City stood ranged like sharpshooters a host of solid, bristling-legged towers. Upon their tops spun gigantic wheels. Out of the centers of these wheels shot the radiant lances, hosts of spears of intensest violet light. The radiance they volleyed was not continuous; it was broken, so that the javelin rays shot out in rhythmic flights, each flying fast upon the shafts of the others.

It was their impact that sent forth the thunderous drumming. They struck and splintered against the walls, dropping from them in great gouts of molten flame. It was as though before they broke they pierced the wall, the Monster's side, bled fire.

With the crashing of broadsides of massed batteries the sledges smashed down upon the bristling attackers. Under the awful impact globes and pyramids were shattered into hundreds of fragments, rocket bursts of blue and azure and violet flame, flames rainbowed and irised.

The hammer ends split, flew apart, were scattered, were falling showers of sulphurous yellow and scarlet meteors. But ever other cubes swarmed out and repaired the broken smiting tips. And always where a tusked and cornute shape had been battered down, disintegrated, another arose as huge and as formidable pouring forth upon the squared tower its lightnings, tearing at it with colossal spiked and hooked claws, beating it with incredible spiked and globular fists that were like the clenched hands of some metal Atlas.

As the striving Shapes swayed and wrestled, gave way or thrust forward, staggered or fell, the bulk of the Monster stumbled and swayed, advanced and retreated—an unearthly motion wedded to an amorphous immensity that flooded the watching consciousness with a deathly nausea.

Unceasingly the hail of radiant lances poured from the spinning wheels, falling upon Towered Shapes and City's wall alike. There arose a prodigious wailing, an unearthly thin screaming. About the bases of the defenders flashed blinding bursts of incandescence—like those which had heralded the flight of the Flying Thing dropping before Norhala's house.

Unlike them they held no dazzling sapphire brilliancies; they were ochreous, suffused with raging vermilion. Nevertheless they were factors of that same inexplicable action—for from thousands of gushing lights leaped thousands of gigantic square pillars; unimaginable projectiles hurled from the flaming mouths of earth-hidden, titanic mortars.

They soared high, swerved and swooped upon the lance-throwers. Beneath their onslaught those chimerae tottered, I saw living

projectiles and living target fuse where they met—melt and weld in jets of lightnings.

But not all. There were those that tore great gaps in the horned giants—wounds that instantly were healed with globes and pyramids seething out from the Cyclopean trunk. Ever the incredible projectiles flashed and flew as though from some inexhaustible store; ever uprose that prodigious barrage against the smiting rays.

Now to check them soared from the ranks of the besiegers clouds of countless horned dragons, immense cylinders of clustered cubes studded with the clinging tetrahedrons. They struck the cubed projectiles head on; aimed themselves to meet them.

Bristling dragon and hurtling pillar stuck and fused or burst with intolerable blazing. They fell—cube and sphere and pyramid—some half opened, some fully, in a rain of disks, of stars, huge flaming crosses; a storm of unimaginable pyrotechnics.

Now I became conscious that within the City—within the body of the Metal Monster—there raged a strife colossal as this without. From it came a vast volcanic roaring. Up from its top shot tortured flames, cascades and fountains of frenzied Things that looped and struggled, writhed over its edge, hurled themselves back; battling chimerae which against the glittering heavens traced luminous symbols of agony.

Shrilled a stronger wailing. Up from behind the ray hurling Towers shot hosts of globes. Thousands of palely azure, metal moons they soared; warrior moons charging in meteor rush and streaming with fluttering battle pennons of violet flame. High they flew; they curved over the mile high back of the Monster; they dropped upon it.

Arose to meet them immense columns of the cubes; battered against the spheres; swept them over and down into the depths. Hundreds fell, broken—but thousands held their place. I saw them twine about the pillars—writhing columns of interlaced cubes and globes straining like monstrous serpents while all along their coils the open disks and crosses smote with the scimitars of their lightnings.

In the wall of the City appeared a shining crack; from top to bottom it ran; it widened into a rift from which a flood of radiance

gushed. Out of this rift poured a thousand-foot-high torrent of horned globes.

Only for an instant they flowed. The rift closed upon them, catching those still emerging in a colossal vise. It CRUNCHED them. Plain through the turmoil came a dreadful—bursting roar.

Down from the closing jaws of the vise dripped a stream of fragments that flashed and flickered—and died. And now in the wall was no trace of the breach.

A hurricane of radiant lances swept it. Under them a mile wide section of the living scarp split away; dropped like an avalanche. Its fall revealed great spaces, huge vaults and chambers filled with warring lightnings—out from them came roaring, bellowing thunders. Swiftly from each side of the gap a metal curtaining of the cubes joined. Again the wall was whole.

I turned my stunned gaze from the City—swept over the valley. Everywhere, in towers, in writhing coils, in whipping flails, in waves that smote and crashed, in countless forms and combinations the Metal Hordes battled. Here were pillars against which metal billows rushed and were broken; there were metal comets that crashed high above the mad turmoil.

From streaming silent veil to veil—north and south, east and west the Monster slew itself beneath its racing, flaming banners, the tempests of its lightnings.

The tortured hulk of the City lurched; it swept toward us. Before it blotted out from our eyes the Pit I saw that the crystal spans upon the river of jade were gone; that the wondrous jeweled ribbons of its banks were broken.

Closer came the reeling City.

I fumbled for my lenses, focussed them upon it. Now I saw that where the radiant lances struck they—killed the blocks blackened under them, became lustreless; the sparkling of the tiny eyes—went out; the metal carapaces crumbled.

Closer to the City—came the Monster; shuddering I lowered the glasses that it might not seem so near.

Down dropped the bristling Shapes that wrestled with the squared Towers. They rose again in a single monstrous wave that rushed to

overwhelm them. Before they could strike the City swept closer; had hidden them from me.

Again I raised the glasses. They brought the metal scarp not fifty feet away—within it the hosts of tiny eyes glittered, no longer mocking nor malicious, but insane.

Nearer drew the Monster—nearer.

A thousand feet away it checked its movement, seemed to draw itself together. Then like the roar of a falling world that whole side facing us slid down to the valley's floor.

CHAPTER XXIX. THE PASSING OF NORHALA

Hundreds of feet through must have been the fallen mass—within it who knows what chambers filled with mysteries? Yes, thousands of feet thick it must have been, for the debris of it splintered and lashed to the very edge of the ledge on which we crouched; heaped it with the dimming fragments of the bodies that had formed it.

We looked into a thousand vaults, a thousand spaces. There came another avalanche roaring—before us opened the crater of the cones.

Through the torn gap I saw them, clustering undisturbed about the base of that one slender, coroneted and star pointing spire, rising serene and unshaken from a hell of lightnings. But the shields that had rimmed the crater were gone.

Ventnor snatched the glasses from my hand, leveled and held them long to his eyes.

He thrust them back to me. “Look!”

Through the lenses the great hall leaped into full view apparently only a few yards away. It was a cauldron of chameleon flame. It seethed with the Hordes battling over the remaining walls and floor. But around the crystal base of the cones was an open zone into which none broke.

In that wide ring, girdling the shimmering fantasy like a circled sanctuary, were but three forms. One was the wondrous Disk of jeweled fires I have called the Metal Emperor; the second was the sullen fired cruciform of the Keeper.

The third was Norhala!

She stood at the side of that weird master of hers—or was it after all the servant? Between them and the Keeper's planes gleamed the gigantic T-shaped tablet of countless rods which controlled the activities of the cones; that had controlled the shifting of the vanished shields; that manipulated too, perhaps, the energies of whatever similar but smaller cornute ganglia were scattered throughout the City and one of which we had beheld when the Emperor's guards had blasted Ventnor.

Close was Norhala in the lenses—so close that almost, it seemed, I could reach out and touch her. The flaming hair streamed and billowed above her glorious head like a banner of molten floss of coppery gold; her face was a mask of wrath and despair; her great eyes blazed upon the Keeper; her exquisite body was bare, stripped of every shred of silken covering.

From streaming tresses to white feet an oval of pulsing, golden light nimbused her. Maiden Isis, virgin Astarte she stood there, held in the grip of the Disk—like a goddess betrayed and hopeless yet thirsting for vengeance.

For all their stillness, their immobility, it came to me that Emperor and Keeper were at grapple, locked in death grip; the realization was as definite as though, like Ruth, I thought with Norhala's mind, saw with her eyes.

Clearly too it came to me that in this contest between the two was epitomized all the vast conflict that raged around them; that in it was fast ripening that fruit of destiny of which Ventnor had spoken, and that here in the Hall of the Cones would be settled—and soon—the fate not only of Disk and Cross, but it might be of humanity.

But with what unknown powers was that duel being fought? They cast no lightnings, they battled with no visible weapons. Only the great planes of the inverted cruciform Shape smoked and smoldered with their sullen flares of ochres and of scarlets; while over all the face of the Disk its cold and irised fires raced and shone, beating with a rhythm incredibly rapid; its core of incandescent ruby blazed, its sapphire ovals were cabochoned pools of living, lucent radiance.

There was a splitting roar that arose above all the clamor, deafening us even in the shelter of the silent veils. On each side of the crater whole masses of the City dropped away. Fleetingly I was aware of scores of smaller pits in which uprose lesser replicas of the Coned Mount, lesser reservoirs of the Monster's force.

Neither the Emperor nor the Keeper moved, both seemingly indifferent to the catastrophe fast developing around them.

Now I strained forward to the very thinnest edge of the curtainings. For between the Disk and Cross began to form fine black mist. It was transparent. It seemed spun of minute translucent ebon corpuscles. It hung like a black shroud suspended by unseen

hands. It shook and wavered now toward the Disk, now toward the Cross.

I sensed a keying up of force within the two; knew that each was striving to cast like a net that hanging mist upon the other.

Abruptly the Emperor flashed forth, blindingly. As though caught upon a blast, the black shroud flew toward the Keeper—enveloped it. And as the mist covered and clung I saw the sulphurous and crimson flares dim. They were snuffed out.

The Keeper fell!

Upon Norhala's face flamed a wild triumph, banishing despair. The outstretched planes of the Cross swept up as though in torment. For an instant its fires flared and licked through the clinging blackness; it writhed half upright, threw itself forward, crashed down prostrate upon the enigmatic tablet which only its tentacles could manipulate.

From Norhala's face the triumph fled. On its heels rushed stark, incredulous horror.

The Mount of Cones shuddered. From it came a single mighty throb of force—like a prodigious heart-beat. Under that pulse of power the Emperor staggered, spun—and spinning, swept Norhala from her feet, swung her close to its flashing rose.

A second throb pulsed from the cones, and mightier.

A spasm shook the Disk—a paroxysm.

Its fires faded; they flared out again, bathing the floating, unearthly figure of Norhala with their iridescences.

I saw her body writhe—as though it shared the agony of the Shape that held her. Her head twisted; the great eyes, pools of uncomprehending, unbelieving horror, stared into mine.

With a spasmodic, infinitely dreadful movement the Disk closed—

And closed upon her!

Norhala was gone—was shut within it. Crushed to the pent fires of its crystal heart.

I heard a sobbing, agonized choking—knew it was I who sobbed. Against me I felt Ruth's body strike, bend in convulsive arc, drop inert.

The slender steeple of the cones drooped sending its faceted coronet shattering to the floor. The Mount melted. Beneath the flooding radiance sprawled Keeper and the great inert Globe that was the Goddess woman's sepulcher.

The crater filled with the pallid luminescence. Faster and ever faster it poured down into the Pit. And from all the lesser craters of the smaller cones swept silent cataracts of the same pale radiance.

The City began to crumble—the Monster to fall.

Like pent-up waters rushing through a broken dam the gleaming deluge swept over the valley; gushing in steady torrents from the breaking mass. Over the valley fell a vast silence. The lightnings ceased. The Metal Hordes stood rigid, the shining flood lapping at their bases, rising swiftly ever higher.

Now from the sinking City swarmed multitudes of its weird luminaries.

Out they trooped, swirling from every rent and gap—orbs scarlet and sapphire, ruby orbs, orbs tuliped and irised—the jocund suns of the birth chamber and side by side with them hosts of the frozen, pale gilt, stiff rayed suns.

Thousands upon thousands they marched forth and poised themselves solemnly over all the Pit that now was a fast rising lake of yellow froth of sun flame.

They swept forth in squadrons, in companies, in regiments, those mysterious orbs. They floated over all the valley; they separated and swung motionless above it as though they were mysterious multiple souls of fire brooding over the dying shell that had held them.

Beneath, thrusting up from the lambent lake like grotesque towers of some drowned fantastic metropolis, the great Shapes stood, black against its glowing.

What had been the City—that which had been the bulk of the Monster—was now only a vast and shapeless hill from which streamed the silent torrents of that released, unknown force which, concentrate and bound, had been the cones.

As though it was the Monster's shining life-blood it poured, raising ever higher in its swift flooding the level radiant lake.

Lower and lower sank the immense bulk; squattered and spread, ever lowering—about its helpless, patient crouching something ineffably piteous, something indescribably, COSMICALLY tragic.

Abruptly the watching orbs shook under a hail of sparkling atoms streaming down from the glittering sky; raining upon the lambent lake. So thick they fell that now the brooding luminaries were dim aureoles within them.

From the Pit came a blinding, insupportable brilliancy. From every rigid tower gleamed out jeweled fires; their clinging units opened into blazing star and disk and cross. The City was a hill of living gems over which flowed torrents of pale molten gold.

The Pit blazed.

There followed an appalling tensity; a prodigious gathering of force; a panic stirring concentration of energy. Thicker fell the clouds of sparkling atoms—higher rose the yellow flood.

Ventnor cried out. I could not hear him, but I read his purpose—and so did Drake. Up on his broad shoulders he swung Ruth as though she had been a child. Back through the throbbing veils we ran; passed out of them.

"Back!" shouted Ventnor. "Back as far as you can!"

On we raced; we reached the gateway of the cliffs; we dashed on and on—up the shining roadway toward the blue globe now a scant mile before us; ran sobbing, panting—ran, we knew, for our lives.

Out of the Pit came a sound—I cannot describe it!

An unutterably desolate, dreadful wail of despair, it shuddered past us like the groaning of a broken-hearted star—anguished and awesome.

It died. There rushed upon us a sea of that incredible loneliness, that longing for extinction that had assailed us in the haunted hollow where first we had seen Norhala. But its billows were resistless, invincible. Beneath them we fell; were torn by desire for swift death.

Dimly, through fainting eyes, I saw a dazzling brilliancy fill the sky; heard with dying ears a chaotic, blasting roar. A wave of air thicker than water caught us up, hurled us hundreds of yards forward. It dropped us; in its wake rushed another wave, withering, scorching.

It raced over us. Scorching though it was, within its heat was energizing, revivifying force; something that slew the deadly despair and fed the fading fires of life.

I staggered to my feet; looked back. The veils were gone. The precipice walled gateway they had curtained was filled with a Plutonic glare as though it opened into the incandescent heart of a volcano.

Ventnor clutched my shoulder, spun me around. He pointed to the sapphire house, started to run to it. Far ahead I saw Drake, the body of the girl clasped to his breast. The heat became blasting, insupportable; my lungs burned.

Over the sky above the canyon streaked a serpentine chain of lightnings. A sudden cyclonic gust swept the cleft, whirling us like leaves toward the Pit.

I threw myself upon my face, clutching at the smooth rock. A volley of thunder burst—but not the thunder of the Metal Monster or its Hordes; no, the bellowing of the levins of our own earth.

And the wind was cold; it bathed the burning skin; laved the fevered lungs.

Again the sky was split by the lightnings. And roaring down from it in solid sheets came the rain.

From the Pit arose a hissing as though within it raged Babylonian Tiamat, Mother of Chaos, serpent dweller in the void; Midgard-snake of the ancient Norse holding in her coils the world.

Buffeted by wind, beaten down by rain, clinging to each other like drowning men, Ventnor and I pushed on to the elfin globe. The light was dying fast. By it we saw Drake pass within the portal with his burden. The light became embers; it went out; blackness clasped us. Guided by the lightnings, we beat our way to the door; passed through it.

In the electric glare we saw Drake bending over Ruth. In it I saw a slide draw over the open portal through which shrieked the wind, streamed the rain.

As though its crystal panel was moved by unseen, gentle hands, the portal closed; the tempest shut out.

We dropped beside Ruth upon a pile of silken stuffs—awed, marveling, trembling with pity and—thanksgiving.

For we knew—each of us knew with an absolute definiteness as we crouched there among the racing, dancing black and silver shadows with which the lightnings filled the blue globe—that the Metal Monster was dead.

Slain by itself!

CHAPTER XXX. BURNED OUT

Ruth sighed and stirred. By the glare of the lightnings, now almost continuous, we saw that her rigidity, and in fact all the puzzling cataleptic symptoms, had disappeared. Her limbs relaxed, her skin faintly flushed, she lay in deepest but natural slumber undisturbed by the incessant cannonading of the thunder under which the walls of the blue globe shuddered. Ventnor passed through the curtains of the central hall; he returned with one of Norhala's cloaks; covered the girl with it.

An overwhelming sleepiness took possession of me, a weariness ineffable. Nerve and brain and muscle suddenly relaxed, went slack and numb. Without a struggle I surrendered to an overpowering stupor and cradled deep in its heart ceased consciously to be.

When my eyes unclosed the chamber of the moonstone walls was filled with a silvery, crepuscular light. I heard the murmuring and laughing of running water, the play, I lazily realized, of the fountained pool.

I lay for whole minutes unthinking, luxuriating in the sense of tension gone and of security; lay steeped in the aftermath of complete rest. Memory flooded me.

Quietly I sat up; Ruth still slept, breathing peacefully beneath the cloak, one white arm stretched over the shoulder of Drake—as though in her sleep she had drawn close to him.

At her feet lay Ventnor, as deep in slumber as they. I arose and tip-toed over to the closed door.

Searching, I found its key; a cupped indentation upon which I pressed.

The crystalline panel slipped back; it was moved, I suppose, by some mechanism of counterbalances responding to the weight of the hand. It must have been some vibration of the thunder which had loosed that mechanism and had closed the panel upon the heels of our entrance—so I thought—then seeing again in memory that uncanny, deliberate shutting was not at all convinced that it had been the thunder.

I looked out. How many hours the sun had been up there was no means of knowing.

The sky was low and slaty gray; a fine rain was falling. I stepped out.

The garden of Norhala was a wreckage of uprooted and splintered trees and torn masses of what had been blossoming verdure.

The gateway of the precipices beyond which lay the Pit was hidden in the webs of the rain. Long I gazed down the canyon—and longingly; striving to picture what the Pit now held; eager to read the riddles of the night.

There came from the valley no sound, no movement, no light.

I reentered the blue globe and paused on the threshold—staring into the wide and wondering eyes of Ruth bolt upright in her silken bed with Norhala's cloak clutched to her chin like a suddenly awakened and startled child. As she glimpsed me she stretched out her hand. Drake, wide awake on the instant, leaped to his feet, his hand jumping to his pistol.

"Dick!" called Ruth, her voice tremulous, sweet.

He swung about, looked deep into the clear and fearless brown eyes in which—with leaping heart I realized it—was throned only that spirit which was Ruth's and Ruth's alone; Ruth's clear unshadowed eyes glad and shy and soft with love.

"Dick!" she whispered, and held soft arms out to him. The cloak fell from her. He swung her up. Their lips met.

Upon them, embraced, the wakening eyes of Ventnor dwelt; they filled with relief and joy, nor was there lacking in them a certain amusement.

She drew from Drake's arms, pushed him from her, stood for a moment shakily, with covered eyes.

"Ruth," called Ventnor softly.

"Oh!" she cried. "Oh, Martin—I forgot—" She ran to him, held him tight, face hidden in his breast. His hand rested on the clustering brown curls, tenderly.

"Martin." She raised her face to him. "Martin, it's GONE! I'm—ME again! All ME! What happened? Where's Norhala?"

I started. Did she not know? Of course, lying bound as she had in the vanished veils, she could have seen nothing of the stupendous tragedy enacted beyond them—but had not Ventnor said that possessed by the inexplicable obsession evoked by the weird woman Ruth had seen with her eyes, thought with her mind?

And had there not been evidence that in her body had been echoed the torments of Norhala's? Had she forgotten? I started to speak—was checked by Ventnor's swift, warning glance.

"She's—over in the Pit," he answered her quietly. "But do you remember nothing, little sister?"

"There's something in my mind that's been rubbed out," she replied. "I remember the City of Cherkis—and your torture, Martin—and my torture—"

Her face whitened; Ventnor's brow contracted anxiously. I knew for what he watched—but Ruth's shamed face was all human; on it was no shadow nor trace of that alien soul which so few hours since had threatened us.

"Yes," she nodded, "I remember that. And I remember how Norhala repaid them. I remember that I was glad, fiercely glad, and then I was tired—so tired. And then—I come to the rubbed-out place," she ended perplexedly.

Deliberately, almost banally had I not realized his purpose, he changed the subject. He held her from him at arm's length.

"Ruth!" he exclaimed, half mockingly, half reprovingly. "Don't you think your morning negligee is just a little scanty even for this Godforsaken corner of the earth?"

Lips parted in sheer astonishment, she looked at him. Then her eyes dropped to her bare feet, her dimpled knees. She clasped her arms across her breasts; rosy red turned all her fair skin.

"Oh!" she gasped. "Oh!" And hid from Drake and me behind the tall figure of her brother.

I walked over to the pile of silken stuffs, took the cloak and tossed it to her. Ventnor pointed to the saddlebags.

"You've another outfit there, Ruth," he said. "We'll take a turn through the place. Call us when you're ready. We'll get something to eat and go see what's happening—out there."

She nodded. We passed through the curtains and out of the hall into the chamber that had been Norhala's. There we halted, Drake eyeing Martin with a certain embarrassment. The older man thrust out his hand to him.

"I knew it, Drake," he said. "Ruth told me all about it when Cherkis had us. And I'm very glad. It's time she was having a home of her own and not running around the lost places with me. I'll miss her—miss her damnably, of course. But I'm glad, boy—glad!"

There was a little silence while each looked deep into each other's hearts. Then Ventnor dropped Dick's hand.

"And that's all of THAT," he said. "The problem before us is—how are we going to get back home?"

"The—THING—is dead." I spoke from an absolute conviction that surprised me, based as it was upon no really tangible, known evidence.

"I think so," he said. "No—I KNOW so. Yet even if we can pass over its body, how can we climb out of its lair? That slide down which we rode with Norhala is unclimbable. The walls are unscalable. And there is that chasm—she—spanned for us. How can we cross THAT? The tunnel to the ruins was sealed. There remains of possible roads the way through the forest to what was the City of Cherkis. Frankly I am loathe to take it.

"I am not at all sure that all the armored men were slain—that some few may not have escaped and be lurking there. It would be short shrift for us if we fell into their hands now."

"And I'm not sure of THAT," objected Drake. "I think their pep and push must be pretty thoroughly knocked out—if any do remain. I think if they saw us coming they'd beat it so fast that they'd smoke with the friction."

"There's something to that," Ventnor smiled. "Still I'm not keen on taking the chance. At any rate, the first thing to do is to see what happened down there in the Pit. Maybe we'll have some other idea after that."

"I know what happened there," announced Drake, surprisingly. "It was a short circuit!"

We gaped at him, mystified.

“Burned out!” said Drake. “Every damned one of them—burned out. What were they, after all? A lot of living dynamos. Dynamotors—rather. And all of a sudden they had too much juice turned on. Bang went their insulations—whatever they were.

“Bang went they. Burned out—short circuited. I don't pretend to know why or how. Nonsense! I do know. The cones were some kind of immensely concentrated force—electric, magnetic; either or both or more. I myself believe that they were probably solid—in a way of speaking—coronium.

“If about twenty of the greatest scientists the world has ever known are right, coronium is—well, call it curdled energy. The electric potentiality of Niagara in a pin point of dust of yellow fire. All right—they or IT lost control. Every pin point swelled out into a Niagara. And as it did so, it expanded from a controlled dust dot to an uncontrolled cataract—in other words, its energy was unleashed and undammed.

“Very well—what followed? What HAD to follow? Every living battery of block and globe and spike was supercharged and went—blooey. The valley must have been some sweet little volcano while that short circuiting was going on. All right—let's go down and see what it did to your unclimbable slide and unscalable walls, Ventnor. I'm not sure we won't be able to get out that way.”

“Come on; everything's ready,” Ruth was calling; her summoning blocked any objection we might have raised to Drake's argument.

It was no dryad, no distressed pagan clad maid we saw as we passed back into the room of the pool. In knickerbockers and short skirt, prim and self-possessed, rebellious curls held severely in place by close-fitting cap and slender feet stoutly shod, Ruth hovered over the steaming kettle swung above the spirit lamp.

And she was very silent as we hastily broke fast. Nor when we had finished did she go to Drake. She clung close to her brother and beside him as we set forth down the roadway, through the rain, toward the ledge between the cliffs where the veils had shimmered.

Hotter and hotter it grew as we advanced; the air steamed like a Turkish bath. The mists clustered so thickly that at last we groped forward step by step, holding to each other.

“No use,” gasped Ventnor. “We couldn't see. We'll have to turn back.”

“Burned out!” said Dick. “Didn't I tell you? The whole valley was a volcano. And with that deluge falling in it—why wouldn't there be a fog? It's why there IS a fog. We'll have to wait until it clears.”

We trudged back to the blue globe.

All that day the rain fell. Throughout the few remaining hours of daylight we wandered over the house of Norhala, examining its most interesting contents, or sat theorizing, discussing all phases of the phenomena we had witnessed.

We told Ruth what had occurred after she had thrown in her lot with Norhala; and of the enigmatic struggle between the glorious Disk and the sullenly flaming Thing I have called the Keeper.

We told her of the entombment of Norhala.

When she heard that she wept.

“She was sweet,” she sobbed; “she was lovely. And she was beautiful. Dearly she loved me. I KNOW she loved me. Oh, I know that we and ours and that which was hers could not share the world together. But it comes to me that Earth would have been far less poisonous with those that were Norhala's than it is with us and ours!”

Weeping, she passed through the curtainings, going we knew to Norhala's chamber.

It was a strange thing indeed that she had said, I thought, watching her go. That the garden of the world would be far less poisonous blossoming with those Things of wedded crystal and metal and magnetic fires than fertile as now with us of flesh and blood and bone. To me came appreciations of their harmonies, and mingled with those perceptions were others of humanity—disharmonious, incoordinate, ever struggling, ever striving to destroy itself—

There was a plaintive whinnying at the open door. A long and hairy face, a pair of patient, inquiring eyes looked in. It was a pony. For a moment it regarded us—and then trotted trustfully through; ambled up to us; poked its head against my side.

It had been ridden by one of the Persians whom Ruth had killed, for under it, slipped from the girths, a saddle dangled. And its owner

must have been kind to it—we knew that from its lack of fear for us. Driven by the tempest of the night before, it had been led back by instinct to the protection of man.

"Some luck!" breathed Drake.

He busied himself with the pony, stripping away the hanging saddle, grooming it.

CHAPTER XXXI. SLAG!

That night we slept well. Awakening, we found that the storm had grown violent again; the wind roaring and the rain falling in such volume that it was impossible to make our way to the Pit. Twice, as a matter of fact, we tried; but the smooth roadway was a torrent, and, drenched even through our oils to the skin, we at last abandoned the attempt. Ruth and Drake drifted away together among the other chambers of the globe; they were absorbed in themselves, and we did not thrust ourselves upon them. All the day the torrents fell.

We sat down that night to what was well-nigh the last of Ventnor's stores. Seemingly Ruth had forgotten Norhala; at least, she spoke no more of her.

"Martin," she said, "can't we start back tomorrow? I want to get away. I want to get back to our own world."

"As soon as the storm ceases, Ruth," he answered, "we start. Little sister—I too want you to get back quickly."

The next morning the storm had gone. We awakened soon after dawn into clear and brilliant light. We had a silent and hurried breakfast. The saddlebags were packed and strapped upon the pony. Within them were what we could carry of souvenirs from Norhala's home—a suit of lacquered armor, a pair of cloaks and sandals, the jeweled combs. Ruth and Drake at the side of the pony, Ventnor and I leading, we set forth toward the Pit.

"We'll probably have to come back, Walter," he said. "I don't believe the place is passable."

I pointed—we were then just over the threshold of the elfin globe. Where the veils had stretched between the perpendicular pillars of the cliffs was now a wide and ragged-edged opening.

The roadway which had run so smoothly through the scarps was blocked by a thousand foot barrier. Over it, beyond it, I could see through the crystalline clarity of the air the opposing walls.

"We can climb it," Ventnor said. We passed on and reached the base of the barrier. An avalanche had dropped there; the barricade was the debris of the torn cliffs, their dust, their pebbles, their

boulders. We toiled up; we reached the crest; we looked down upon the valley.

When first we had seen it we had gazed upon a sea of radiance pierced with lanced forests, swept with gigantic gonfalons of flame; we had seen it emptied of its fiery mists—a vast slate covered with the chirography of a mathematical god; we had seen it filled with the symboling of the Metal Hordes and dominated by the colossal integrate hieroglyph of the living City; we had seen it as a radiant lake over which brooded weird suns; a lake of yellow flame froth upon which a sparkling hail fell, within which reared islanded towers and a drowning mount running with cataracts of sun fires; here we had watched a goddess woman, a being half of earth, half of the unknown immured within a living tomb—a dying tomb—of flaming mysteries; had seen a cross-shaped metal Satan, a sullen flaming crystal Judas betray—itself.

Where we had peered into the unfathomable, had glimpsed the infinite, had heard and had seen the inexplicable, now was—

Slag!

The amethystine ring from which had been streamed the circling veils was cracked and blackened; like a seam of coal it had stretched around the Pit—a crown of mourning. The veils were gone. The floor of the valley was fissured and blackened; its patterns, its writings burned away. As far as we could see stretched a sea of slag—coal black, vitrified and dead.

Here and there black hillocks sprawled; huge pillars arose, bent and twisted as though they had been jettings of lava cooled into rigidity before they could sink back or break. These shapes clustered most thickly around an immense calcified mound. They were what were left of the battling Hordes, and the mound was what had been the Metal Monster.

Somewhere there were the ashes of Norhala, sealed by fire in the urn of the Metal Emperor!

From side to side of the Pit, in broken beaches and waves and hummocks, in blackened, distorted tusks and warped towerings, reaching with hideous pathos in thousands of forms toward the charred mound, was only slag.

From rifts and hollows still filled with water little wreaths of steam drifted. In those futile wraiths of vapor was all that remained of the might of the Metal Monster.

Catastrophe I had expected, tragedy I knew we would find—but I had looked for nothing so filled with the abomination of desolation, so frightful as was this.

"Burned out!" muttered Drake. "Short-circuited and burned out! Like a dynamo—like an electric light!"

"Destiny!" said Ventnor. "Destiny! Not yet was the hour struck for man to relinquish his sovereignty over the world. Destiny!"

We began to pick our way down the heaped debris and out upon the plain. For all that day and part of another we searched for an opening out of the Pit.

Everywhere was the incredible calcification. The surfaces that had been the smooth metallic carapaces with the tiny eyes deep within them, crumbled beneath the lightest blow. Not long would it be until under wind and rain they dissolved into dust and mud.

And it grew increasingly obvious that Drake's theory of the destruction was correct. The Monster had been one prodigious magnet—or, rather, a prodigious dynamo. By magnetism, by electricity, it had lived and had been activated.

Whatever the force of which the cones were built and that I have likened to energy-made material, it was certainly akin to electromagnetic energies.

When, in the cataclysm, that force was diffused there had been created a magnetic field of incredible intensity; had been concentrated an electric charge of inconceivable magnitude.

Discharging, it had blasted the Monster—short-circuited it, and burned it out.

But what was it that had led up to the cataclysm? What was it that had turned the Metal Monster upon itself? What disharmony had crept into that supernal order to set in motion the machinery of disintegration?

We could only conjecture. The cruciform Shape I have named the Keeper was the agent of destruction—of that there could be no doubt. In the enigmatic organism which while many still was one and which, retaining its integrity as a whole could dissociate

manifold parts yet still as a whole maintain an unseen contact and direction over them through miles of space, the Keeper had its place, its work, its duties.

So too had that wondrous Disk whose visible and concentrate power, whose manifest leadership, had made us name it emperor.

And had not Norhala called the Disk—Ruler?

What were the responsibilities of these twain to the mass of the organism of which they were such important units? What were the laws they administered, the laws they must obey?

Something certainly of that mysterious law which Maeterlinck has called the spirit of the Hive—and something infinitely greater, like that which governs the swarming sun bees of Hercules' clustered orbs.

Had there evolved within the Keeper of the Cones—guardian and engineer as it seemed to have been—ambition?

Had there risen within it a determination to wrest power from the Disk, to take its place as Ruler?

How else explain that conflict I had sensed when the Emperor had plucked Drake and me from the Keeper's grip that night following the orgy of the feeding?

How else explain that duel in the shattered Hall of the Cones whose end had been the signal for the final cataclysm?

How else explain the alinement of the cubes behind the Keeper against the globes and pyramids remaining loyal to the will of the Disk?

We discussed this, Ventnor and I.

"This world," he mused, "is a place of struggle. Air and sea and land and all things that dwell within and on them must battle for life. Earth not Mars is the planet of war. I have a theory"—he hesitated—"that the magnetic currents which are the nerve force of this globe of ours were what fed the Metal Things.

"Within those currents is the spirit of earth. And always they have been supercharged with strife, with hatreds, warfare. Were these drawn in by the Things as they fed? Did it happen that the Keeper became—TUNED—to them? That it absorbed and responded to them, growing even more sensitive to these forces—until it reflected humanity?"

“Who knows, Goodwin—who can tell?”

Enigma, unless the explanations I have hazarded be accepted, must remain that monstrous suicide. Enigma, save for inconclusive theories, must remain the question of the Monster's origin.

If answers there were, they were lost forever in the slag we trod.

It was afternoon of the second day that we found a rift in the blasted wall of the valley. We decided to try it. We had not dared to take the road by which Norhala had led us into the City.

The giant slide was broken and climbable. But even if we could have passed safely through the tunnel of the abyss there still was left the chasm over which we could have thrown no bridge. And if we could have bridged it still at that road's end was the cliff whose shaft Norhala had sealed with her lightnings.

So we entered the rift.

Of our wanderings thereafter I need not write. From the rift we emerged into a maze of the valleys, and after a month in that wilderness, living upon what game we could shoot, we found a road that led us into Gyantse.

In another six weeks we were home in America.

My story is finished.

There in the Trans-Himalayan wilderness is the blue globe that was the weird home of the lightning witch—and looking back I feel now she could not have been all woman.

There is the vast pit with its coronet of fantastic peaks; its symboled, calcined floor and the crumbling body of the inexplicable, the incredible Thing which, alive, was the shadow of extinction, annihilation, hovering to hurl itself upon humanity. That shadow is gone; that pall withdrawn.

But to me—to each of us four who saw those phenomena—their lesson remains, ineradicable; giving a new strength and purpose to us, teaching us a new humility.

For in that vast crucible of life of which we are so small a part, what other Shapes may even now be rising to submerge us?

In that vast reservoir of force that is the mystery-filled infinite through which we roll, what other shadows may be speeding upon us?

Who knows?

THE END

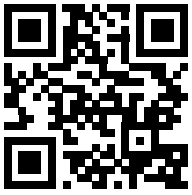
The Metal Monster

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