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DESERT CITY

Which concerns a golden people more ancient than the desert—on which they live unknown—in the midst of a teeming earth.

JIM MOORHILL had jockeyed planes from one end of the country to the other. There was little under the head of flying he had not tried. At times living came easy; at other times—he hardly lived.

One of the tough periods was in full swing. For days Jim had wondered where his next meal was coming from; but, so far, had always managed to meet a friend at mealtime. Thus he met a stranger—George Bent.

There was nothing unusual in the meeting. Jim was hunting a meal ticket. George Bent proved to be a good one. It was during their third dinner together that George suddenly asked: "You wouldn't, by any chance, be looking for a job? I've hesitated to ask."

For the first time in months, Jim was embarrassed. He had told, as a personal experience, every high-flung tale he could recall.

"I'm stumped, George," he said. "I've been trading my stories for your meals. I thought the stories were good, but—I can darn well use any kind of a job."

Two days later Jim boarded a boat for Arabia to join an expedition into the desert. It meant liberal pay for several months. He had excellent accommodations and hoped to have a good time. He was heading out to find a man lost for months. Jim Moorhill was to spend his time in the air, carrying on the search from a base camp.

TWO MONTHS LATER Jim took a biplane up into the oven-hot air of the Arabian Desert. A week passed un-

eventfully, with a flight over a different sector each day. But no sign of life disturbed the monotony of sand and waste.

The ninth day Jim circled farther from the base. It was peculiar, droning alone over a waste of sand that looked and sounded almost like a tropic sea! The heat waves tended to hypnotize a man into an unnatural sleep. Jim Moorhill didn't fall asleep, but he did forget to be alert. And so, unawares and without warning, the storm caught him and tossed his ship into a maelstrom of heaving wind and sand that destroyed his directions and his compass in thirty seconds!

There came a blast of desert heat that lifted him upward like a bouncing kite. The plane spun and whirled, making the controls as useless and ineffectual as if they did not exist. Jim clung to his seat as a gust of cold wind caught the plane and lifted it again—or—and the thought choked him worse than the sand itself—carried him downward. He didn't know which, because he did not know whether the ship itself was riding right-side up!

Wind, rain, hail, sleet, cold gusts, ovenlike blasts, spirals—and all the caprices might be sweeping him at a hundred-mile-an-hour pace toward the open sea—or toward the interior. Visibility scarcely reached to the prop, yet he knew it continued to spin. How the motor had held free of the driving sand he did not know, but it droned on evenly. Even above the shrieking of

by WARNER VAN LORNE



For a moment she struggled, then stopped and looked at him. Surprise was so evident in her face that Jim wondered if this were the first time she had ever been stopped from following a mad impulse.

the wind he heard it and it was comforting.

Caught in the vortex of a twister, Jim tried to climb with it above the heart of the storm area. Every strut and guy-wire moaned with a soft crescendo of

destructive vibration. Ten minutes passed; fifteen, thirty, forty-five.

There came a sudden rift in the wind, a calm which broke through wind and cloud alike to show a momentary glimpse of earth ten thousand feet

below. Jim dived like a shot before the rift closed in above him. He saw the earth, and more. Rimmed in the desert he was certain he caught the vision of a walled city appearing wraithlike through the slashing clouds of sand!

Panic seized him at last. So far as he knew, so far as the Arabs professed to know, there was no settled, human habitation within a hundred miles in any direction. Had the storm— Such speed was impossible, and yet, there it was. He brushed his goggles and looked again.

The storm was leaving him behind. There was still a ninety-mile gale, but it was a steady, sweeping aftermath of the maelstrom. Only now weakness assailed him. Jim knew he must put down somehow, somewhere.

Dinily, his mind recalled the Arab legends of a white city in the desert, inhabited by Djinns. But no white man had ever seen it, and its existence had been laughed away. Perhaps, through weakness he was doomed to *real* adventure, for he was hopelessly lost without a compass.

The motor coughed once and again. Wind or no wind, he must sit down, and the only hope of safety would be in the shadow of those walls.

In a long glide, Jim rode the wind to a landing. Without power, she slid forward at one hundred and thirty, one hundred and twenty, one hundred and ten. She bounced, then rolled without slackening pace. A draft pulled as the wind pushed. Too late, he knew he must hop the wall. Too late! The dual force nullified the controls.

One arm protected his face as he crashed head-on. He heard the ensuing explosion, saw the flash of flame before blackness engulfed him.

MANY HOURS LATER Jim Moorhill opened his eyes to feel the sting of antiseptics, even before his sense of smell recorded its surrounding

presence. A prickly, yet not unpleasant, sensation seemed to engulf his body. A vague feeling that all was not well seeped into his numbed brain—yet he felt no pain.

His eyes focused slowly on the men who bent above him, busy with oddly formed scalpels and surgical instruments. Had he been fully conscious he would doubtless have moved, and that would have been fatal.

But a puzzled light crept into his eyes, for these men were of translucent gold! It almost seemed as if he could look right through their bodies. Yet they were men in form, grave, classic-featured, and one of them, noting the expression in his eyes, smiled down reassuringly.

Golden flesh! These men were of no race known on earth! The city of the Djinns!

Was he— Had they changed him? Jim's head rested on some sort of pillow. He glanced downward—a sweeping glance that packed a thousand horrible impressions into a fraction of a second.

His body was strapped tightly to the table—what was left of his body! It was still normal flesh, but only the trunk remained intact. And that the doctors—they must be doctors!—were incising and readjusting.

In a tank to the right he saw his legs, immersed in some amber solution. The stumps of the thighs were toward him, and he could see the ends of the veins, still full of blood which seemed to be held cataleptically in position. One of his arms was similarly resting in a jar of liquid at his left.

The doctors proceeded with their incisions, yet there was not a quiver of pain, and no blood flowed!

One swift glance registered these and many other, minor impressions. It required only the briefest instant in time, yet even as his eyes registered the truth, consciousness left him and he sank back into a merciful oblivion.

SLOWLY, Jim Moorhill's eyes opened. There was a sense of the long passage of time in the recesses of his brain as he aroused. Memories of golden-bodied men bending above him, remained. His eyes became aware that the same men encircled him now, talking softly in their strange tongue, fingers moving swiftly, surely, over his flesh.

Horror gripped him afresh as he remembered his last waking impressions. Involuntarily, his eyes moved downward. His right leg was in place! And even as he looked they moved the left leg into position, sealing it with some magic fluid and holding it gently, until, as the seconds passed, he could feel the blood flow coursing once more through the veins! And pulsing through the arteries! Faint, white scars showed where incisions had been made across his torso, but even as he watched these seemed to fade away, healing as fast as he could think.

Now and again one of the surgeons brushed an amber fluid across his skin, leaving behind it a warm sensation of renewing strength.

There was feeling in every inch of his body, but not the slightest sensation of pain from the amputations or knitting tissues. Both arms were again in place, though Jim would have sworn he had seen them in a tank of amber fluid on his first awakening. To his amazement, he found that he could move his finger tips!

Jim felt a sudden desire to awaken from what was certainly a horrible delirium, but straps held him tight. Even at the slight movement of his fingers, one of the strangers moved forward, caught his eye and shook his head negatively. Evidently the mad dream must go on. His fevered eyes watched as the tissues of his severed leg caught, held, and healed before his eyes—but he lay still.

After what seemed a dreary hour, the

surgeons removed the straps and lifted him tenderly. A few steps away they lowered him into a tank of liquid, keeping his head free. They motioned him, earnestly, to remain quiescent; and Jim's brain struggled helplessly to free itself from the grizzly nightmare.

He felt normal, as if he could climb out of the tank and go on living as he had for the last twenty-seven years. But he must not antagonize these men, dream figures though they seemed to be. After having experienced the operation he feared what they might be able to do if aroused. Or had they performed it? Was he dreaming, only to awake in a few minutes?

The golden men seemed real enough as they stood watching him. But they appeared more interested in the success of the operation than in him personally, and he felt chagrined.

The warm, glowing sensation of well-being affected him from head to foot now. Time seemed to drag, while translucent golden men watched every reaction of his body. Jim would have liked to watch, too, but they kept his head still.

At last he was lifted from the tank and, to his surprise, he was stood upright on his feet! *He could stand!* His body seemed to be entirely whole again. Or was he dreaming?

A pile of torn, bloody clothing—his flying togs—on the floor snapped him into full consciousness. From their appearance he had been battered pretty badly.

Questions rose in his mind to bother him. These people didn't understand English. He tried French and Spanish, but they shook their heads. The words they uttered to each other were strange, yet they smiled and appeared friendly enough.

Still, his body was flesh and blood, while theirs was of some cloudy translucency which the eye could almost—but not quite—penetrate.

One handed him clothes, simple garments like their own: a pair of tight-fitting pants with an overcape which hung from one shoulder. The right shoulder and side remained bare almost to the waist, where the cape was caught together. He felt momentarily strange in the outlandish garb, but was suddenly elated as he remembered how freely and easily he had moved his body in donning it!

FROM the operating room he was led through a long, dark passage. But at its terminus they stepped out into desert sunshine. The sudden glare blinded him for a moment, then his vision cleared, and he gasped at the sight of vast gardens in full bloom, stretching in a gigantic circle about what appeared to be a hole in the surface of the city floor.

There were scores of the golden people in the gardens, women as well as men. The women wore simple gowns slipped over their heads. The length and coloring of these varied conventionally as if designating a station in life.

Jim observed carefully as he walked. His brain recorded details of architectural planning; of gardening, of the physiological characteristics of the populace. He had completely forgotten the fact that he had been off from the operating table for less than an hour.

He noticed that his strange companions observed him closely and became gradually aware that they were probing his mind, reading his thoughts as easily as he himself would have perused a book! Their very brains seemed to have been tuned in on his.

He stood, at last, by the inner edge of the rows of buildings facing toward the huge pit in the center of the city which seemed identical in construction in every direction. It was round, built with the hole as its geometrical heart. There was a border garden two hundred feet wide around the pit itself,

several rows of buildings circling around the gardens inside the walls.

The buildings varied in size, but none was over five stories. Some were decorated with beautiful, sculptured friezes, but the big majority were plain. Only one type of stone was in evidence, a kind of white marble, very beautiful in itself but lending no variety of color.

The city wall stood well above the tops of the buildings. It was visible from where Jim stood, across the tops of the buildings on the opposite side of the pit. The ground directly before him sloped gently toward the edge of the opening, as if it had gradually washed down to form a terrace.

His companions led him through narrow passages between the buildings, until the party reached the towering, outer wall. Here Jim halted, awed by the very grandeur of what seemed to him the most amazing feat of engineering he had ever beheld. Of polished white marble, the wall rose some sixty feet into the air. Its inside surface appeared to his dazzled gaze to be as smooth as glass. Great stones—some of them ten feet high and twelve feet long—made up its face.

At intervals of perhaps ten feet, zig-zagging to the top, were tiny apertures in the facing, like windows, as if passageways penetrated the inner masonry.

But the party moved on, to a gateway in the wall. They entered it and moved along a dim corridor thirty-five feet in length, to emerge on the outer side of the wall. Close by rested the wreckage of the biplane, a twisted mass of fused and shattered metal. Jim tried to visualize himself in the battered, twisted cockpit—shuddered, closed his eyes, and turned away.

THE HEAT of the desert sun reflected from the outer wall was terrific, and perspiration burst from every pore in Jim's body. He noticed that the

golden men seemed not to be affected. Then he noticed another thing; his shadow was dense and black against the sand, while the shadows cast by his companions were slight, as if the majority of the sun's rays passed through their bodies unimpeded!

They smiled and nodded at him as the thought came, as if to say his interpretation had been correct.

To the left of the wreck, golden men were laboring in fields. Rich, fertile areas were covered by truck gardens and grain fields. Some of the crops appeared familiar, but many were of strange foliage. Food for the city was being grown here in the heart of the desert! Huge pipe lines carried water to the fields. While Jim watched he saw a man turn a valve in one line, and throw a spray over a whole section of near-by garden.

Beyond the cultivated ground, cattle and sheep were grazing on rich pasture land, watered by shallow irrigation ditches. The fields seemed to be fenced, but in the distance, in the bright rays of the sun he could not be sure.

Once more inside the wall, Jim was conducted to the very edge of the huge crater which centered the city. A thousand feet below his feet, crystal-clear water formed a lake which filled the pit from side to side. A thousand feet below! It fascinated him, held him. A sudden desire to dive into its cool, glistening depths seized him.

But even as the thought came, a hand rested on his shoulder. It broke the spell, and Jim looked up into the troubled eyes of a golden man who, Jim sensed, had read his thought.

A few steps back from the rim the party entered a stairway leading downward, and seemingly winding endlessly around the rim of the pit. The darkness of the stairs, the gradual curve, made the great size of the lake and crater more apparent. The golden men carried only crude torches to relieve

the darkness, and this also tended to add to the impression of great distances.

One hundred steps below the surface they turned aside into a short tunnel which ended in a tiny room. The door closed, and instantly there came a sense of motion. The room was an elevator, and it was descending. Minutes passed before it stopped, but when they at last emerged, Jim found himself on the shore of the lake at the bottom of the crater.

And beneath the surface of the lake, how deep it was hard to judge, he could make out the irregular surfaces of what appeared to be a gigantic meteor! What tremendous velocity must be represented by the force which would sink a meteor twelve hundred or more feet into the earth? The very thought of colossal forces made Jim's head swim. It was stupendous!

Every path and stairway in the pit showed signs of great antiquity. Ages had passed since the great mass had bored its way into the desert. The trail around the rim of the lake was worn into the solid rock. The steps of the stairway were worn in grooves from the tread of countless thousands of feet. What terrific toil must have been involved in boring upward to the surface of the earth before even the first step was taken to build the city and its fertile, farm-land oasis!

Golden people were rowing on the lake in small boats of peculiar design, and even the boats appeared ancient. Some were fishing for sport, apparently. Others were working on businesslike nets.

JIM was kept for a month in a small room overlooking the lake, with a man whose name sounded like "Zulin" for company. Zulin seemed to have a proprietary interest in Jim. He served as tutor as well as companion, cramming his protégé's mind with a new language.

Jim was treated kindly and fed well, but it became apparent that he would not again be permitted to leave the room until he was able to converse in the language of the golden people. Having resigned himself to this fact, Jim set to work with a will, to master the elementary vocabulary of these strange benefactors. Zulin was a careful and thorough tutor. He worked with *objects* at first, then with *motions* for verbs, and Jim followed well. Inside of three weeks simple conversations were possible. On the thirtieth day Zulin undertook to explain, and Jim understood.

"White man," Zulin said, gazing across the lake as he spoke, "you are the first of your race we have seen. We knew of no people on this planet with the knowledge you possess. You are advanced. Those who have previously neared the city are not.

"You are the greatest experiment we have ever attempted. Before now, when wanderers approached, we blanked accurate memories and substituted fear of this area. Thus we have been left undisturbed.

"Once, many years ago, an apparently civilized group wandered close, lost and starving. None lived to be questioned except one infant, a female. We have raised her to womanhood, taught her all our science. She could tell nothing of her origin, but appears as you do. We would say she is of your race, save that her hair is of a different color."

Jim started. He realized suddenly that the hair of all these golden folk was of an identical golden hue. To them, apparently any difference in coloring represented a racial division—even the hair!

This girl Zulin mentioned must be white! The thought quickened his pulse. He was alien to these people, but perhaps this adopted girl might serve to bridge the rift. A longing for

his own kind had been growing during his benevolent confinement.

Zulin was watching him with a half smile, and Jim felt a sense of irritation at having his most private thoughts read openly.

"The girl," Zulin said softly, "is the reason you are alive. If it were not that we feel she needs a mate you would not have been repaired.

"Repair work on your body proved very simple, though had we been too late to preserve your blood we could have done nothing. We had no source from which to procure more. Our greatest work is surgery, for it requires the finest skill in all the universe to perform even the slightest operation on one of our people. This is due to a condition of earth atmosphere. Our blood will not congeal, but continues to flow from even the slightest cut or bruise. So we have worked for a thousand years to perfect our surgery.

"We decided the girl, Beta, must have a mate. So you live. Our young men may not mate with her, because our bodies contain certain elements which would be disastrous to your people. You have noticed what is, to you, peculiar qualities in our structure. We are alien to this earth. We landed here by accident many generations ago—so many that our past is dimmed by antiquity.

"The huge meteor which lies beneath the lake was once a space ship bearing thousands of my ancestors across the void. What caused its collision with earth I do not know, but some survived. We had not known atmosphere with more than a fractional density to this one. Our ship would have stood firm in rarer air but the friction of your oxygen caused disaster. The controls overheated and there was no way to stop.

"You have seen the result. Blessedly, the pit broke open an underground river which has enabled us to live safely

through a thousand generations.

"The child, Beta, first taught us that there were civilized races extant. But we decided not to venture out. Our written records were destroyed in the crash. What we know comes by word of mouth, but the planet of our origin is a secret which died on the sealed lips of our ancestors. They must have had reason to keep it so.

"So we have burrowed our way to the surface. We have built a city with the metal from our space ship. We have found sufficient oil for our purposes of melting piping and small tools.

"When you arrived the discussion revived as to contacting your peoples. But the thoughts we traced through your brain, of wars, and bickerings, and famines, changed our minds. There is, aboard the ship, enough of a soft metal held in high esteem by your people to make one nation very rich. They would make war for our treasure. Yet we have no use for it. It is soft, and we have been unable to harden it for use as piping."

Jim, when Zulin paused, sat thinking deeply. Much that he said about the outside world was true. His mind turned to the girl Zulin had mentioned as the reason for his being alive. Their idea of mating him with a girl he hadn't even seen as yet was out! But perhaps they had not consulted the girl either?

Zulin was frowning slightly, puzzled. The golden men had given Jim his life for a purpose, yet he wasn't satisfied. It *was* puzzling.

"Your race is odd, white man. Even so, you resemble the girl. She was angered when we announced to her that we had procured her a mate. She says she wishes to choose her own mate, or have none! Perhaps we should not have repaired you.

"But come, you must see her and know for yourself that she is desirable. Our repairs have made you a better-appearing man than before, and it is to

be hoped she approves. If she wants you—you will become her mate. You have no choice."

Jim was told to wait in an ornate room in a building above ground. Zulin departed. The air which swept the room was much better than that which hung over the deep-set lake. Jim got his first glimpse of the gardens in thirty days, and he suddenly realized that it was good to be alive.

AN ANGRY WOMAN'S VOICE issuing from the doorway brought Jim around. Zulin came hurrying into the room with a fuming girl striding behind him, belaboring him with words. Jim whistled in amazement.

The girl stopped short, a picture of confused fury for a moment. Then she advanced slowly and looked him over from head to foot as if he were some prize animal on display.

Jim watched with a frown, which slowly changed into a smile. Then he laughed aloud and she grew angry again, stamped her feet and pummeled him with little, futile fists. Jim continued to laugh while she stormed, a blue-eyed, black-haired fury, perfect of bodily contour, but spoiled as any brat of the city sidewalks.

The golden man was distressed. He seemed undecided what course to take, but the girl continued to hit Jim with her tiny fists, until he became weary of being pummeled.

"Do you try to beat up everybody you see?" he demanded, still smiling, but grabbing her arms and holding her impotent.

For a moment she struggled, then stopped and looked at him. Surprise was so evident in her face that Jim wondered if this were the first time she had ever been stopped from following a mad impulse. An instant later she burst into tears.

Jim released her. Zulin showed anger now, and started forward, but Jim

moved before him. The girl was as perfect an houri as Jim could dream. His heart played tricks every moment she was in the room.

The situation was dangerous. Zulin appeared to think she was hurt. Jim knew he'd made a mistake, with no logical corrective method save one. He stepped forward, took the girl in his arms and kissed her heartily.

Her surprise lasted until he released her. Even the golden man stood in open-mouthed astonishment. Beta stood a moment frowning slightly; then, to Jim's amazement, she stepped forward and tilted her face up toward his!

She had experienced her first kiss—and liked it! Jim was not slow to accept her invitation to repeat. He carried on until she wriggled out of his arms, suddenly shy! Zulin was so bewildered by the change that he stumbled over his own feet. A sudden dawning understanding came into his eyes, and he turned and tiptoed from the room with a smile on his face.

Beta had captivated Jim. He couldn't have left the city without her, even if it meant torture to remain. He respected her sudden shyness, and when she sat down in a corner of the settee, he dropped onto a stool by the window. Thus, in low tones, began their first heart-to-heart conversation.

An hour later the girl took Jim's hand and led him on a new tour of the buildings of the city, the only home she had ever known. There were eleven thousand inhabitants, and it seemed that the new lovers met them all! Beta smiled and nodded to all of them, and they, in turn, seemed pleased at her attention.

Beta introduced Jim to several of the older men as her mate. This brought a pleasant response from every one. The respect with which she was greeted brought an inquiry from him, and she replied quite simply, that, since she was

the only person in the city who could not possibly gain by favor, she had come to be the arbiter of all lovers' quarrels, marriage disagreements, and money arguments. There being no organized government, she arbitrarily named the council and limited it to the surgeons, thus doing away with strife for office. In short, she was a queen without the name! Her commands were obeyed as if she were a deity.

SINCE there could be no jealousy or striving for her hand, Jim Moorhill was made welcome. They would be joined by the simple rites of the community.

Such information as Jim had given of the outside world puckered Beta's brows. The more he stated of the wonders of civilization, the more she frowned. The golden people had given to Beta all the culture they could know or teach, and she was wise enough to feel that it ill-fitted her for a strange world. To Jim, their customs might seem quaint—but to Beta there was a reason for every one. She did not want to leave.

With the freedom which was now his, Jim satisfied his curiosity as to the mechanics of the water supply, of machinery which seemed simple but effective. Zulin conducted him through the underground works, explaining as he moved.

Water power was the only driving force. Even the elevator to the pit was driven by water pressure. A control within the car opened or closed a valve, binding or releasing water beneath a huge piston at the bottom of the shaft.

The stream which fed the lake had been tapped a mile away, at which point it rose considerably above the top of the shaft. The perfect balance of the water weight against the weight of the car intrigued Jim into hours of study.

Pumps, operated by this same pressure, sent water to the top of a well

above the lake. Holes cut through the rock formations carried the water on to the pipe lines and irrigation ditches, and even into the more modern of the buildings.

The space ship had sliced neatly through an underground river. It flowed into one side of the pit at the lake surface, and carried the overflow waters away on the opposite side.

There were many varieties of edible fish in the lake, washed in by the river. These furnished an important item of the food supply. People were employed at all times netting them. A metal mesh across the outlet channel stopped the danger of either loss of boats, or inhabitants, or fish!

Life, in general, was a simple affair, with none of the finer comforts of civilization, yet it crept into Jim's consciousness like a drug. He thought of going out into the world to bring back electrical equipment and implements, and books. There was an ample supply of gold in the hull of the space ship to purchase anything they could use, and the thought of electric lights was attractive.

The people went to bed with the dusk and stirred again only with the dawn. There was no movement of any kind through the city at night. When occasion required, they lighted crude oil torches, but there was little save an occasional illness to disturb the night in the city.

The temperature of the buildings was not unpleasantly hot after Jim became acclimated. Cool air drifted up from the lake below, keeping the atmosphere livable and moist. Slowly, the thought became fixed that it was best the city remain unknown to the outside world.

Civilization had given Jim much less

than he received here in peace, and courtesy and favor. Here he could be happy. With a woman he loved, he could forget what he had left behind.

He stood alone atop the high wall, gazing across the desert. He was a long way from all his former friends and associations. He did not even know in what direction that fatal storm had swept him, or where he was! Everything he had known before he came was off there somewhere, but he was satisfied. He did not want to go back. It never even occurred to him that men were even now scouring the desert, looking for his plane!

It was passing strange that he could live satisfied, without regret, in a fantastic new world. He wondered why it was; and all the time he knew. The golden men had a strange power of hypnosis. Dreamily, he thought they must have used this power on him. Their minds were strong. They could have forced any member of the human race to their will easily. They must have planted the desire to remain, to live content. Even the idea of going after new devices was strangely gone.

Jim did not care. With a smile, he turned back, down the dark stairway to the earth, then moved toward the center of the city.

Suddenly, he laughed aloud, a happy laugh. He had seen a young couple kissing awkwardly in the shadow of a pillar! Twice more during the short walk toward the pit he saw the same thing repeated, once in plain sight of scores of other golden folk.

He had inaugurated a new game and they were enjoying it!

Somewhere up ahead, in a sumptuous apartment, Beta was waiting. There was no other world.