

EXILES OF THE DAWN WORLD

BY

NELSON S. BOND

The truly startling story of a Twentieth Century Adam and Eve hurled back through the ages of Time to the noisome, steaming birth of the world.





WHEN they reached the edge of the clearing, Johnson stopped the car. They made no move to get out, but sat surveying with varying degrees of interest the midnight-cloaked terrain around them. A weed-gnarled road still lay open before them, winding its tortuous way through unkempt fields to the house which loomed like a sullen blot against the night sky, but Johnson made no effort to solve its meanderings. He let the motor idle; its thrum was a background for the querulous scrapings of small night things. He pushed back his hat and expelled his breath with an air of finality. Quite obviously the man was afraid. He said uncer-

tainly, "Well—there it is, Mr. McClary."

"Mmm," said Jeff. He stared at the house. A clean wind broomed cobwebs of cloud from the moon, and the sudden silver light etched slant roofs and hollow windows sharply, and the same light found a grin on Jeff's face. Not a handsome face, but an attractive one. Lean-jawed and hard, a large nose, eyes keen with a perpetual, amused curiosity. "That," he agreed, "is it. But why stop here, Sheriff? This road leads to the house, doesn't it?"

Johnson wriggled.

"It—it gits worse from here on."

"Looks all right to me."

"This ain't my car," said Johnson virtuously. "Got to perfect county propety. Besides—" Sudden inspiration descended on him. "—I got to git back to town to tell 'em you reached here all right. They'll be wonderin'."

"What the sheriff means," interrupted a bittersweet voice from the back seat, "is that he's scared spitless, and doesn't want to go any farther. Isn't that right, Sheriff?"

"Nothin' o' the sort!" Johnson scowled indignantly. "I'll thank you to be more respectful of the lawr, Miss! It just so happens I got duties to perform."

"And a wife," finished Jeff, "and two children. We understand, Sheriff. Well, I guess I go the rest of the way by shank's-mare." He stepped from the car. "See you folks later, then. Good-bye, Miss Anderson. Put lots of bogey-man atmosphere in your story."

"Say, *"au revoir,"*" said the girl sweetly, "but not, *"Good-bye!"*" Metal clanged and she was standing beside him in the darkness, her brushed-felt hat at the level of his lips, the scent of her outdoory perfume vaguely tantalizing his nostrils. "Or maybe you should just say, 'Hyah, Toots!' I'm not leaving, Maestro. I'm coming with. The *World-Times* readers are going to get an eye-witness account of this banshee brawl if I have to scribble my notes on a ouija board."

Jeff frowned. "No!" he said.

"Pardon Cagliostro?"

"I said," repeated Jeff, "No!" 'N' as in 'Nuts!'; 'O' as in 'On you way, sister!' A ghost-busting expedition is no place for a hundred and twenty pounds of female

fluff, even if said nuisance does have a typewriter for a brain and printer's ink in her arteries."

"Six," corrected Beth Anderson. "Not twenty. Not much of a ladies' man, are you?"

"I know when they're in the way. Now run along, or papa spank."

MOVEMENT in the dusk, and her swift anger rising as she spun to face him.

"Has it ever occurred to you, Mr. McClary, that I'm free, white and twenty-one? It is my privilege to go and do as I see fit. I've suspected for some time that you were no gentleman. I was right. Now you might as well know my full opinion.

"In addition to being a stage 'magician,' a sleight-of-hand expert, you've won yourself a reputation as a ghost-layer. You gallivant about the country exorcising spooks in haunted houses—like this. For, of course, a consideration—and to the fare of reams of newsprint.

"In my judgment, your wraith-laying is as phony as your stage tricks. I firmly believe that your ventures into spiritualism—including this present job—are publicity stunts. I mean to verify that belief, and pass the facts on to the *World-Times* readers!"

"Listen, Miss Anderson—"

"You listen! There's no 'ghost' in that house, and you know it! Whatever manifestations the frightened natives may have seen or heard were carefully planted there. By you or your underlings."

"I have never," said Jeff solemnly, "seen this town or this house before."

"and it will give me the greatest pleasure," the girl continued inexorably, "to expose you to my readers. In other words—" She stopped for breath, glared at him. "In other words, Mr. McClary, I think you are a fake, a fraud, a quack, and a humbug!"

"I—" began Jeff. And stopped. "A fraud?"

"Definitely."

"Mmm. And a fake?"

"Beyond," scornfully, "a doubt!"

"I see," said Jeff thoughtfully. He stared at her, then at Johnson, who sat in open-mouthed wonder. "That will be all, Sheriff. You may go now."

Johnson jerked a thumb. "Her?"

"I'm staying," said Beth.

"She," agreed Jeff, "is staying. Oh—when you and Lafferty come back tomorrow, bring a vial of sal ammoniac."

"Smelling salts," said Beth Anderson sweetly. "For Mr. McClary. The shock of exposure will be dreadful."

"Oh?" said Johnson. The car backed and turned; its lights gnawing an ochre tunnel through the trees. The motor throbbed, and a fading tail-light winked and bobbed obeisance to the road. Then it was gone, and the sultry loneliness of night closed in about them. Jeff kicked a pebble savagely.

"Suppose I admit something, Miss Anderson? Suppose I confess that you are partly right; that in ninety-nine out of a hundred cases 'ghosts' are mere figments of the public imagination, conjured out of hallucination, embodied by mass hysteria—"

"Now it all comes out!"

"—but that one other time there are forces of which man has reason to be terrified? Frankly, I don't know what confronts us."

"Shall we," said Beth, "go to the house?"

Jeff stared at her long and angrily. Her shoulders were firm; it would be a pleasure to shake them—and her—until her teeth rattled, until the jarring of her gray cells knocked some sense into her head. It would be smart to send her on her way. But she had called him a quack. A humbug. . . .

"Very well!" he snapped. He turned on his heel. A thin breeze rustled in the darkling trees; her footsteps and his were a challenge to the warning night-sounds. Somewhere in the distance a dog howled piteously. And the intent eyes of unseen things seemed to follow them to the house.

THE house itself was like a vast, bland face. With covert eyes it studied their approach. Its sagging door was a mouth agape behind fanged colonnades.

Ever responsive to influences, Jeff felt a cold, an unearthly aura of evil emanating from this ancient dwelling. Despite her bravado, the girl must have felt it, too, for as he paused at the door, she shivered briefly. Jeff grinned.

"Something you et, no doubt?"

She was a ramrod of disdain. "The night is cold."

"Uh-huh. You're sure you want to go in?"

"I wouldn't miss it for worlds. What's supposed to happen here? Do white things with long, hairy claws hop out and yell, 'Boo'?"

"If I couldn't be funnier than that," frowned Jeff, "I'd give up. No, sister, this business has the earmarks of the real thing. You've heard of poltergeists?"

"I've heard of the old malarkey."

"I wouldn't doubt it. Well, this isn't some. This is something that has petrified the localities for two years. And with good reason. Coupled with the 'manifestations' you seem to think I created have been a few sinister occurrences—including the disappearance of livestock and, on at least one occasion, the disappearance of a human being."

"The *what*? Impossible! They would have combed the house from top to bottom if they thought—"

"They *did* think! And they did comb; that's why I'm here. They found nothing but footprints. The footprints of the man who disappeared."

"I don't believe it!" declared Beth Anderson.

"That's okay by me. I can do without your charming trust. But there's one thing I will insist on having. Your obedience. We'll be here together all night; in the morning my assistant, Lafferty, will come for us. But until then, I shall expect and demand that you do as I say. Is that clear enough?"

Beth glanced at him derisively. A vagrant shaft of moonlight found her face; her lips were mocking.

"Clear," she gibed, "but not convincing, Maestro!" She turned suddenly and slipped into the house.

Jeff swore softly and followed her. That is how he was just in time to see that which had stopped Beth still in her tracks, just a few paces inside the portal. A glinting, narrowing, vanishing pencil of light on the floor of the hall before them. For an instant it was a ribbon gleaming golden on dusty oak; then it was gone.

Jeff sprang forward, a hand fumbling in his pocket, finding a flash.

"There! It came from that room on the right!" And with the girl behind him, he raced into what once had been a library, was now a high-lofted cavern ribbed with gaunt and empty shelves.

His flashlight stabbed the darkness, swung a circle about the room. There was no visible source for the light that had startled them. It was gone. The old house groaned and creaked, dust eddied beneath their feet and wove spirals in the firm, uncompromising glare of the flash-beam. Jeff's brow contracted.

"Perhaps you'll change your mind now? Or perhaps I caused that light?"

For a moment the girl's breath had been uneven, but it steadied now, and she laughed lightly.

"Tell me, Mr. Spook-chaser—is it usual for ghosts to leave footprints?"

"Footprints?"

"Shoe-prints, rather. On the floor before you—"

JEFF flashed his light downward. It was as she had said. Crossing the dusty floor were the well-defined tracks of feet shod in the modern fashion. From the hall to one of the bookcases ran the scuff-marks; at that point there was a confusion of prints—then nothing!

"I hate to appear difficult," murmured the girl demurely, "but if you did happen to have an accomplice in the house, Mr. McClary, and if there were a secret passage, say from that row of shelves to some hidden spot—"

Jeff's glare silenced her. But he nodded slowly.

"All right, sister. We'll see. Secret passageway, hey? You must be a detective story addict. The springs are generally concealed in the decorations, aren't they? Things like these fat cupids, for instance. I suppose if I were to press their chubby noses—like this!—a panel would swing out and—*Great guns!*"

He stepped back, shocked. For beneath the pressure of his fingers, the noses of the pudgy cherubs had given way and with a wheeze the entire book-panel was moving out!

Beth Anderson laughed at him triumphantly.

"Surprised, Maestro? You missed your vocation, I'm afraid. You should have

been an actor. Let's go find your friend. Maybe he will have something to eat in his cubby-hole. Ah! There he is now!"

For the swinging case had stopped, exposing a long, dark corridor slanting downward. Off in the distance a tiny bell tinkled, and once again the darkness of the corridor and the library in which they stood was relieved by a flood of golden light as a door swung open at the end of the passageway. Footsteps pattered up the ramp. And as Jeff McClary's lips framed protests that were never spoken, a figure filled the opening before them.

A large man, broad of shoulder, deep of voice. And his words were an invitation.

"How do you do, my friends? This is an unexpected pleasure. May I welcome you to my little refuge?"

II

THE words Jeff finally found were not inspired. He goggled them at the stranger. And, "Who," he demanded, "are you?"

Beth smiled benevolently. "As if," she hinted, "he didn't know. So you're the ghost, eh? Well, I must say I'm disappointed."

"Don't mind her," said Jeff. "Who are you?"

The stranger stared at them, dubiously, in turn. A network of fine lines creased his forehead. Beneath beetling brows his eyes were keen and hard and shrewd. He said, "But this is no place for conversation, surely? Let us go below, to my laboratory. It will be more comfortable there."

"Laboratory?" said Jeff.

But the man did not answer. He turned, led the way down the sloping corridor. At a midway point he touched a button on the tunnel wall, the false door behind them closed softly. A few more paces and they entered a large, brightly illumined chamber, the sight of which brought a gasp to Jeff McClary's lips.

It was incredible, impossible, that here beneath an ancient, deserted farmhouse in the countryside of upper New York state, there should be a laboratory matching in

modernity, equipment and completeness those of wealthy research organizations, but it was so!

In sharp contrast to the fusty atmosphere above, it was fresh-aired, bright, and spotlessly clean here. One wall of the room was shelled to the ceiling with bottles of chemicals. Another was proud with neat, orderly rows of books and index files. Upon a central work-bench, Bunsens breathed and retorts bubbled. In a far corner of the room a weird-looking electrical appliance of indeterminate purpose hummed, whined and spat sparks of white fire. Jeff recognized a generator, a centrifuge, failed to identify a dozen other pieces of the research scientist's paraphernalia.

And the stranger was motioning them to chairs. "Be seated, *brite*. This is an occasion. It is not often I have the pleasure of entertaining visitors. You are pleased with my little hideaway? Later I must show you the rest. I have also a comfortable bedroom and bath, a kitchen and study."

Beth was staring at Jeff, her eyes bewildered.

"I don't get it, Maestro. Why all this trouble just to give a few hicks duck-bumps?"

"Stubborn, aren't you?" sighed Jeff. "You're still barking up the wrong tree, sister. Don't ask me; better ask Mr.—Mr—?"

"*Doctor*," corrected their host quietly. "Dr. Franz von Torp." He bowed austereley. "At your service!"

"How do you do?" responded Jeff mechanically. "And I'm Geoffrey McClary. Professional magician, investigator of psychical phenomena, and—according to my companion, here—a first-class fake and humbug. The young lady is Miss Anderson, sob-sister on a metropolitan daily."

But Beth's eyes had widened. "Dr. von Torp?"

"That is correct, *fraulein*." He smiled faintly.

"Not the Dr. von Torp? The professor who disappeared a few years ago after a row with the A.S.A.?"

A dark cloud swept suddenly across von Torp's brow; for a moment his eyes were sultry. But when he spoke, it

was in a rich, creamy voice barely edged with bitterness.

"The same, *fraulein*. Unfortunately, the members of the American Scientists' Association saw reason to ridicule certain theories I placed before them. They took exception to my experiments in the field of time-travel; they also objected to several other purely scientific activities—"

"Time-travel!" interrupted Jeff. "Do you mean you really believe time-travel to be possible, Doctor?"

But the reporter in Beth Anderson had risen to the surface. Her pique at Jeff, her scoffing attitude, had completely disappeared. Her eyes were bright with excitement, her nostrils tense, as she scented story-stuff.

"Then Mr. McClary wasn't deceiving me? He really didn't know you were here? You built your laboratory out in this deserted countryside to get away from the world? Let, or caused, the natives to believe the house was haunted that you might be let alone—?"

There was a look of distaste in von Torp's eyes.

"In your very questions, *fraulein*, you should find answers to satisfy your curiosity. All that I have done has been done simply to avoid such interludes as this.

"My work is important. I have neither the time nor the inclination to devote precious hours to satisfying public curiosity. That is why I came to the country. The common people are stupid. By investigating, they could have learned that this deserted homestead had been sold to me. It would have been equally easy to learn that, periodically, I have supplies delivered here.

"But, no! They would rather accept the fantastic, supernatural explanation—which, I confess, I encouraged in mild fashion—that the house was 'haunted.' It is a humorous commentary on the human race that they should have solved the problem, finally, by paying a professional 'ghost-layer' to come here and track me down!"

Jeff laughed politely. "Doctor," he said quietly, "I'm interested in something you mentioned a moment ago. Your time-travel theories. Since coming here, have you discovered anything further?"

"Further?" Von Torp straightened

haughtily. "But of a certainty, sir! I have completed my task!"

"You—?"

"I have done that which my erstwhile colleagues derided as impossible! I have successfully bridged the chasms that lie between Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow. Behind you, my eager young friends, lies the evidence. The greatest invention ever achieved by man. My time machine!"

THREE was no denying the strangeness of the machine to which he pointed. It was unlike anything Jeff had ever seen before; if the crossing of time were not its reason for being, then surely, judging by its appearance, its purpose must be something equally unbelievable.

Its major elements were a large, circular platform, slightly raised above the floor-level; four upright metallic standards that, starting from equidistant points on the dais' perimeter and seemingly parallel, somehow succeeded in joining at the top in a twisting, helical formlessness that the eyes strained to untangle; and a dial-bedecked panel whereon were placed innumerable switches, contact buttons and levers.

Feeding it were two heavy cables, each as thick as a man's wrist. These were connected to the dynamos across the room. Jeff stepped nearer the machine. The dials, he noted, were at rest. Their purpose was undecipherable. Some seemed to be marked in meters, others in power units; a large one in the center was divided into quadrants ranging from zero to infinity.

"It works?" He turned eagerly to von Torp. "You're telling us the truth? It really works?"

"I have said so," said the scientist proudly. "But you wish proof. See, then!"

He moved swiftly to the machine. From his pocket he drew a penknife. This he placed on the platform. He adjusted the dials with infinite care, studied them, nodded.

"I have set the controls," he stated, "to project my knife two minutes into the future. A short time, merely that you may witness without boredom the operation of the machine. You comprehend

that when I press the lever—so!—the knife will disappear—"

His hand thrust down a lever. Instantly there came a humming crescendo of sound from the generators. Blue mists crackled where the parallel uprights of the instrument met in weird embrace. A sheet of cold, white flame rippled across the gleaming platform.

"It's gone!" cried Beth.

"But naturally," nodded von Torp. "It has ceased to exist in our time. In the present. It has been projected into the future of two minutes hence." He released the lever and the current died away. "Now, if you will watch closely, you will see it return. Or, rather, it will stand still and we will catch up to it—"

Jeff stared, fascinated. As a boy, the question of time-translation had been one that intrigued his imagination; the coming of manhood, and the dedication of his life to the twin arts of prestidigitation and deception had strengthened, rather than diminished, his interest in the problem. The two minutes were like hours. He stood with bated breath, watching the platform. Beside him, even the girl was silent and intent.

SLOW seconds ticked away. Once Dr. von Torp made a slight movement; the scrape of his foot was thunderous loud. And then, suddenly—

"Th-there!" cried Beth. "There it is!"

Jeff's eyes leaped to the clock above the platform. Exactly two minutes had passed. And on the dais lay, shining and serene, von Torp's knife!

He spun to face the scientist. There was more than admiration in his eyes; there was awe and respect. "You've done it, Doctor! You've accomplished the miracle man has so long dreamed of! Congratulations, sir."

"*Danke schoen!*" said Dr. von Torp. His voice was soft, pleased, but there was a note to it that caused Jeff to look up suddenly. A note of dominant, gloating triumph. A softness with ominous overtones. "Your praise gratifies me, young man. You are one who understands. I know it will thrill you to be permitted to aid in this great work."

"Aid?" Jeff did not like that voice. Nor did the look in von Torp's

eyes please him. The shrewd intelligence was flavored, now, with something noisome. A weird, savage look; the crawling brightness of insanity.

"I shall grant you a great privilege," purred von Torp. "In thanks for your kindness, I shall let you select the era you wish to dwell in."

Even then, Jeff did not get it. It was too mad. But Beth Anderson was a woman. Logic toppled before the swift truth of her intuition.

"He means he's going to put *us* in that machine! We are to be his guinea pigs. Now I know what happened to that man who disappeared! He was used as an experiment. And I remember something else, too. The A.S.A. refused to listen to von Torp because a board of psychiatrists reported him to be mad—"

"*That will do!*"

Even before Beth's words could register on Jeff's stunned brain, von Torp's roar interrupted her. And the big man moved with amazing swiftness. His hand darted to a coat pocket, came out holding an ugly, snout-nosed Luger.

"You will step to the platform, and quickly! Both of you! *Ja*, I intend that you should become subjects for my experiment. The painstaking scientist never announces his results without many such. The *frau* is right; never was it my intention you should leave this room, except through the machine.

"You did not fool me with your fine words of praise. I know you came here to steal my invention, the fruits of my genius! But you have failed, hear? Into another time, you I will exile. No, don't move, Herr McClary! Else I shoot! On the platform. Quickly!"

His voice lifted, word by word. He was screaming, now, in a violent hysteria. And his finger was treacherously tense on the hair-triggered Luger. Thoughts whirled dizzily through Jeff's brain. There was no arguing with this insane genius. A countermove would spell swift death. Play up to him—that was the way. Pretend to obey, stall for time, try to find a propitious moment. . . .

"Very well, Doctor!" he said. "See, we are obeying. We are anxious to aid in your research work. It is a great honor to assist you. Tell us where to

stand, what we must do—" And as the scientist, mollified, hesitated, "Move, you little idiot! I'll handle this!"

"What are you whispering?" demanded von Torp suspiciously.

"Nothing, sir. I'm just asking Miss Anderson not to delay. We're ready now, sir. Only we don't know just what we should do next. If you would be kind enough to advise us?"

There was a light of approbation in the scientist's eyes.

"You are an intelligent man, McClary. Maybe one day I shall recall you from your exile and have you report your findings. Now, let me see—does your interest lie more in that which has been, or that which lies before? Think before answering. The future holds more fascination, but the past offers the solution to many riddles."

Jeff said, "It's a difficult decision, Doctor. Had I a little more time— Couldn't we discuss it carefully? Lay a plan?"

"*Ach, I have it!* The very thing!" von Torp beamed suddenly. His hands flickered over the controls, made swift adjustment. "The dawn of intelligence, that is the era you should visit. The days of Earth's youth, when man was just creeping out of the morass of ignorance. I am good to you! It will be a glorious adventure."

Beth Anderson's breath broke sharply.

"Do something. Before—"

Jeff silenced her. But his eyes, too, were tense. Time was growing short. He adopted a wheedling tone. "But that will be dangerous, Doctor. We go unprepared. We will need weapons. A pistol. . . . May I have yours?"

It almost worked. So intent was he on his project, that unconsciously von Torp nodded, started to pass the gun to Jeff. Almost their hands had met on the weapon when he divined Jeff's purpose. And he screamed in sudden fury.

"So! So you seek to trick me! Let go, young fool! Or I will—"

Then everything happened at once. For his hand was on the lever, but Jeff's leaping hand had gripped the Luger. Von Torp was the larger man, but Jeff's was the strength of desperation. For a breathless instant they hung poised in a battle of muscles and wills, while the girl clung,

tense and breathless, to Jeff's shoulder.

And then the gun, miraculously, was in Jeff's hand. But von Torp was scrambling after it like a maddened beast, charging onto the platform beside them. Back and forth they swayed, fighting tooth-and-claw for the weapon that meant life or death.

Neither won! For as Jeff strove to level the gun on his mad assailant, von Torp's hammerlike hand slashed across his wrist, jarred his arm away and upward. The automatic flew from his nerveless grasp. Just for an instant he glimpsed it soaring like a sullen, wingless bat across the room. Then it thudded into a nest of wiring there. Sparks flew. And a cold, white pain drove violently through his veins! His eyes were blinded by a swift effulgence. His body was twisted and wracked with innumerable needles of torment. There was a dull throbbing in his ears, the roaring cacaphony of bestial throats, a single, piercing scream, and the hoarse gasp of von Torp—

Then blackness. And silence.

III

BLACKNESS and silence. Then out of the blackness a growing light. A swirling, misty light that brightened with each passing moment. Out of the silence the birth of sound; distant at first, then nearing, swelling, threatening.

And Jeff opened his eyes.

He was lying, body wet and half submerged, in a bog that sprawled beneath a gigantic forest. Forest? A jungle, rather. And what a jungle! Surely no human eyes had looked ever before on a scene like this.

About and around him, like sky-groping columns, the thick and spongy trunks of massive ferns were a matted wall. Their mottled fronds were a webwork veiling the sky. Only a few wan fingers of sunlight filtered through that mossy fan.

From the bog rose a dank and steamy mist. Its odor was the stench of rotting flesh and vegetation. Jeff gagged at the sight and scent of it, seeing, as he now did, how the sluggish water was acrawl with foetid life. He staggered to his feet, dimly aware that beside him von Torp had awakened. He strode to Beth Anderson's side, lifted her limp figure.

Her eyes opened at his touch. For a mute moment an awe filled them. She stared about her in wild surmise.

"Where—" she whispered. "Where are we?"

"I don't know. But there's one damned sure thing I do know. We've got to get out of this swamp. It's a death-trap if ever I saw one."

And he took one slogging, mud-sucking step forward. But von Torp halted him with a cry.

"Stop!"

Jeff glared at the man savagely.

"Don't start anything now, von Torp. We'll settle our affair when we get out of this mess."

"Stand still, you young fool! Don't you understand what has happened? That gun shorted my machine. We've been hurled backward through time. Thousands of years. Into the garden of man's creation. And you're walking away from the gateway through which we entered. If we leave this spot, we lose forever our last hope of returning to our own time."

The mad scientist gnawed his nether lip. "Yet, you are right. It is impossible to stay here. Jungle fever would destroy us."

Jeff found it in him to marvel at von Torp's swift, cold logic. The man was assuredly mad, but he had the quick adaptability, the brain and reasoning-power of a genius. A look of concern deepened in his eyes.

"But what are we to do?"

"We must build a cairn to mark the spot on which we wakened. There should be rocks beneath this scum. Here—" He scooped the brackish depths with delving hands. "Just as I thought! Come now! If you would return to the earth you left behind, you must work."

Beth stirred in Jeff's arms. For the first time he realized the anomalous intimacy of their position. Her body was the only real and vibrant thing in a universe gone suddenly mad, unreal. She slipped from his grasp, bent to help find stones. He could almost read the nausea in her eyes as she thrust her arms into the noxious ooze, but she persisted.

"Earth?" she repeated. "You mean we are no longer on earth?"

"We're on earth."

But for our

knowledge of earthly conditions in this time, we might as well be on a distant planet. This is not the soft, tamed earth you knew. This is the wild, the savage morass of man's beginnings."

"You set the dials," said Jeff. "For what period?"

Von Torp stared at him levelly, a touch of mockery in his eyes.

"For a period I thought befitting your type, friend McClary. I had not anticipated becoming your companion in this adventure. But I thought it might be interesting to follow the progress of two such healthy, splendid young savages as you and Miss Anderson in a world unspoiled by civilization.

"However, now that I am here, we shall have an even more interesting experiment. We shall learn—"

"What period?" repeated Jeff.

"Look about you. Can't you tell by these ferns, the steaming fen, this crawling slime we wade through? I set my dials for that age when Nature's monstrous experiment in size and overlordship—the reptile—was dying from earth. When mammals were assuming control, and when an awkward, bi-pedal mammal was striving to gain supremacy over more powerful, but less intelligent, members of his phylum. When man, himself, was not one, but two or three or a half dozen species, each at war upon the other. For a period roughly a million years before the century in which we were born!"

IT was impossible, of course. Utterly mad and fantastic. Yet, looking about him, Jeff knew von Torp spoke the truth.

"What good will it do to build this cairn?" he asked. "We three, you say, were the only ones who knew of your laboratory. How are we ever to find our way back?"

"You forget, my young friend," said von Torp proudly, "that I build the time-machine. I can build another. I do not say it will be an easy task; it may be the labor of long years. But in the bowels of this young earth there are metals and I have the knowledge of their refining and casting.

"With your help, one day there shall be a means of returning to our time. But, mark you! I offer you eventual return,

and my price for that gift is your whole-hearted allegiance and labor. There must be no question of who is the master here!"

His words brought an instant, hot response to Jeff's lips. But the girl forestalled his reply.

"Yes, Doctor, but if our plan is to build a second machine, why need we mark this spot so carefully?"

"As security for ourselves. Over the ages, seas may rise and mountains topple. By sheer chance, we landed in a comparatively safe spot. We might just as easily have landed in the crater of a boiling volcano, fathoms deep in ocean waters, a quarter mile above earth."

"You mean—" gasped Jeff, "you mean you knew that? Yet you would have thrust us into the unknown, realizing the infinitely slim possibility of our surviving the passage?"

Von Torp shrugged petulantly.

"What would you have me do? The cause of science must be progressed. What is a human life—?"

"That's why your other victim—or was it victims—never returned! You damned, murdering madman! You want our help? Our obedience? I'd rather help a jackal find its carrion, obey the dictates of the devil—"

"Jeff!"

Jeff's anger faded. The girl's eyes were pleading for peace. Von Torp continued to doggedly heap stone upon stone, his face bland as if he had not heard the tirade. It occurred to Jeff McClary, suddenly, that for the second time since the beginning of this mad venture, Beth Anderson had called him by his given name. Which meant she must realize what he was now beginning to realize. That he and she were bonded together in this crisis against a common foe. A foe with whom, for the present, at least, expediency demanded they make armistice.

He said grudgingly, "All right! But remember, von Torp, this is a two-way agreement. Beth and I will barter our labor for your knowledge. But if you make any attempt to double-cross us—"

He let the threat die there, and bent to the job in hand. The cairn was growing slowly, but the sucking mud devoured stones like a hungry maw. It was a knee-high, truncated pyramid now, but the slow

ooze yielded fewer rocks to his scooping grasp.

He moved farther from the cairn each time he sought a new addition to the dolmen. It was back-breaking labor. Muggy heat surged up from the fen, the rank stench choked him, nauseated him. Once, as he chanced to glimpse his calves, he was surprised to see that the bottoms of his trousers already were frayed and torn. The cloth was stained with blood. He looked more closely, discovered with swift, sickening disgust that his legs were pendulous with bloated, loathsome leeches.

The jungle about him was alive with sound; the cries of unknown beasts and clamoring of birds merged shrilly with the insistent, sucking murmur of the swamp. Great, rasping, bladed ferns scraped drily above him. Once he started, hearing and feeling the mud beneath him quiver at the impact of some distant terror.

But he fought down his fears. All this was subordinate to the task confronting them. They must complete their cairn. Then they could seek higher, drier land.

From the swamp behind him came a piercing scream; a cry that whirled him about, sent him stumbling through mucky foulness on flying feet. A cry in a familiar voice. Beth's voice.

"Jeff! Jeff—help! This thing—!"

And von Torp's terror-stricken below. . . .

IV

IT was only rods to the small clearing wherein the others labored, but to Jeff it seemed miles. Snarled roots and matted fibers snared his feet, his steps foundered in a soft and yielding mire. But when finally he burst through the labyrinth of vines, it was to view a scene of horror.

Charging from the opposite end of the marsh came a weird, ungainly beast. A huge, elephantine monster, fully six feet in height at the withers, mottled flesh-and-gray in color. Its head was a vision from an evil dream. Long and ugly, with three pairs of hornlike eminences on the skull. One pair on the nose, another above the ruddy, porcine eyes, and again a pair where the head joined the body in swelling rolls of flesh.

These were the weapons with which,

head lowered, it now threatened Beath and von Torp as it plunged toward them at express-train speed. Vicious, too, were its fangs. The canine teeth of its upper jaw, a pair of dagger-keen tusks, curving downward and outward from its dripping jowls.

As Jeff watched, the man and girl ended their terrified immobility. Behind Beth a massive tree, broad of bole, gnarly, offered easy footholds and safety. Jeff roared encouragement as she caught a low limb and clambered up.

Von Torp was close behind. Despite the grotesque monster's speed, it seemed as if there was ample time for both of them to escape its charge.

Then the beast bellowed! A coughing, irate snort hawked from its spume-white nostrils. And with that sound von Torp flew into weakling panic. He hurtled himself forward. Reckless of the girl's meager hold, thoughtless of everything except his own precious hide, like a gassed rat he clawed up the tree-trunk.

His weight and haste thrust the balance against the girl. For a dreadful moment Beth succeeded in maintaining a precarious hold. Then, with a tiny, choking cry, she fell!

It did not occur to Jeff that his next, instinctive action was gloriously foolhardy. There was no time to think things out, to measure consequences. There was only time to act.

As her slim figure toppled, he cried aloud, surged forward. In the back of his brain was one clear thought amid confusion. The beast's charge reminded him of something he had once seen enacted in a lazy Spanish town, a drama played before tiers of swarthy *aficionados*. That clumsy, lumbering beast . . . that lowered head . . . that blind, devastating charge . . . and the method of turning that charge.

Mud sucked and clung to his heels, but he ran. And as he ran he tore at the lining of his coat-sleeve; the deep, capacious lining of a professional magician's jacket. From it whipped a length of filmy silk, so fine that it could be drawn through a baby's finger-ring, but dazzlingly scarlet!

And as he ran, he cried aloud.

"Run, Beth! That way! To the higher ground!"

It was nip-and-tuck for a moment. The

girl dragged herself erect, turned without parley, fled in the direction designated. The dawn-beast thundered on, its great, splayed hoofs splashing, churning the fetid swamp. Its speed was greater than Jeff's, but Jeff was nearer the girl. And Jeff was angling between the creature and its prey, his crimson kerchief wide, unfolded, now. A bloody challenge against a background of drab.

THE beast recognized that challenge. Recognized and responded like the fighting bull of the twentieth century, the bull whose parent it might remotely be. Its tiny, bloodshot eyes rolled in their sockets. An instant it seemed to hesitate. Its body quivered in an agony of indecision. Then, with a second coughing snarl, it wheeled toward the flaming lure Jeff dangled before it.

Jeff's veins flowed with fire, but the sweat on his forehead was like the clammy kiss of death. Having tempted the charge, there was nothing left to do now but meet it. A swift glance after Beth. Each fleeting second offered her a greater margin of safety.

But himself?

The six-horned creature was perilously near. Jeff held the scarlet lure at arm's distance. This was like bull-baiting, but never had a matador faced a charging wall six feet in height. No time for gestures here, no opportunity for graceful swirls and curvetings. Yet he must hold his pose until the last possible moment.

Then its foul body-stench was in his nostrils, its splashing charge was drenching him with spray. Red, hateful eyes glared, not at him, but at the flaming cloth that antagonized it. And its hurtling body with within yards . . . feet!

Jeff roared, and fell away!

Just in time, for at that moment the swamp-thing's plated carcass splashed against his arms with bruising force. So close it brushed his shoulder that he glimpsed the stiff, tiny hairs of its nostrils, saw small things crawling in an old and unhealed wound in its foreleg.

And it bellowed again, for the kerchief, whipping from Jeff's grasp, was pierced and clutched by the monster's lethal horns! The damp, fine silk settled and clung before the creature's eyes like a veil, a mask-

ing, blinding and confusing hoodwink over its eyes.

Jeff tried to laugh, but the laughter choked in his throat. A chance in a million but it had worked! For the blinded beast was threshing farther and deeper into the gray swamp, bellowing, shaking its massive head in vain attempt to lose that swaddling mask.

He ran, then. He was not afterward sure how long or far he ran. All he knew was that he caught Beth, and they joined hands and fled like frightened children from the dim and evil marsh. Until the sluggish water thickened to mud, the mud turned coarse, became hard ground. Until they stood on the slope of rising hills, saw above them the clean, blue sky, and before them pasture-land waving shoulder-high with grasses.

It was not until, exhausted, they flung themselves to the ground in that cleaner, safer spot that they thought of their companion, of the coward who was the author of all their troubles. Beth looked at Jeff, and her eyes were anxious.

"Von Torp!" she said.

"VON TORP!" echoed Jeff. "Lord, yes! I forgot all about him. When that damned watchchamaycall it—"

"Dinoceras," said the girl unexpectedly.

"Huh? Dino which?"

"Dinoceras *ingens*. I did a Sunday feature once for the *World-Times*. On fossils. An amblyopod of the Cenozoic era. Which proves that von Torp was telling the truth. We have been hurled hundreds of thousands of years backward into time's secret ages."

"I never doubted him. That swamp we landed in was no Aquacade. But—" Jeff frowned. "We've lost him, damn his hide! I'm sure I couldn't find my way back to the cairn. But it serves him right. The skunk deliberately pushed you off that tree—"

"Which doesn't alter the fact," said Beth, "that we need his knowledge. We have to find him, Jeff. If we don't, we're going to spend our lifetimes playing caveman. And I, for one, don't know that I'd be such a great success—"

She stared ruefully at her clothing. Fifth Avenue exclusives, thought Jeff, had certainly proven themselves inadequate to

the exigencies of dawn-world life. In a hurry. His clothing was soaked, torn, ragged; hers was irreparably ruined.

Her tailored suit was out at the elbows, ripped up the seams, shredded in a hundred places by the thorn-fingers that had clutched at them as they plunged recklessly through the swamp. Her brushed-felt hat was gone. One shoe had lost its heel. Her hose were patches of fabric clotted to her legs by a network of cuts and scratches.

"And they were Nylon, too!" mourned Beth.

"If we live a million years," offered Jeff, "you can sue the DuPonts. One thing is sure, we can't go wallowing back into the damp-and-smelly 'til we've rigged up some new duds. Whether you like it or not, the only thing I can see to do is try playing caveman for a while. Find some safe place to set up light housekeeping. We know there are animals. If I can take a few hides and you can find a way to stitch 'em, maybe we can have a new, all-leather outfit—"

"—with mammoth-tusk buttons?" finished the girl. Jeff looked at her swiftly, admiringly. He had spoken with deliberate lightness of tone, hoping to lift her spirits with gaiety he, himself, did not feel. It was a revelation and a surprise to find that she had sporting-blood as ready as his own. Sporting-blood? Another word was better. Less pretty, perhaps, but more apt. This gal had guts!

He rose.

"Right, pal! And now, let's get going. See those hills over there? They look to me like they might be a good place to set up— What was that?"

Swift concern settled over the girl's face. "Voices!" she faltered. "But surely—?" "Look out!" Jeff yelled and moved at the same time. Out of the thick, high grass that towered above them like an ocean's green crest flew a dark object, a stone as large as a man's clenched fist. Only Jeff's hasty push saved Beth.

She fell, sprawling, the rock missing her by scant inches. But she was back on her feet in an instant.

"Wh-what is it, Jeff?"

"I don't know. Cut and run! For the hills!"

Another stone hurtled toward them. Another and yet another. And for the second

time they fled, this time from a foe unseen. Through tall grass, sharp and high, they raced blindly, not knowing whether their headlong flight took them toward or away from their enemy. . . .

The storm of missiles thickened. Now there were not only rocks, but sticks as well. And once a forked stick, in the cleft of which a sharp stone had been rudely crammed, hummed menace as it whisked past Jeff's head. Even in that hurried moment, seeing it, Jeff's eyes opened in wonderment.

Such weapons were not the arms of beasts! And they had heard voices, too. Voices! That meant—

"Beth!" he gasped to the girl. "Beth—it's men!"

But there came no answer. For at that moment there sang through the air a whirling bludgeon. Its spinning edge glanced across Beth's temple, scored a welt there. Suddenly the girl's weight was heavy on his arm.

Jeff dropped beside her, horrified. His heart sank as he saw the bright blood burst from that deep gash, began to beat again as he saw that though her face had drained of color, her breast still rose and fell in measured cadence.

With a little cry, he took her into his arms, moved forward. He had taken no more than a half dozen steps when the grasses parted before him—and there, suddenly, he was face to face with his antagonists.

And they were men! Men as tall as himself, bearded and unkempt, savage creatures garbed in crude hides, bearing mean weapons of wood and stone, but—men!

Their leader raised his arm. To Jeff there came a sort of prescience. Some deep-rooted intuition warned him that if that arm were to fall, he and Beth would surely die. It must not fall! He lifted his voice in a great shout.

"No! No! We are friends!"

The creature before him could not possibly know the meaning of his words. But something in Jeff's voice stayed his arm. For a long moment he stood hesitant, brow furrowed in thought. Then he grunted short, unintelligible syllables. A host of followers swarmed in upon Jeff, pinned his arms to his side, wrenched the girl

from his grip. It was senseless to resist. The leader spoke again; Jeff was prodded forward. And the little caravanserai of dawn-folk moved toward the low hills, bearing with them two captives.

V

THEIR journey was not a long one. A half hour, maybe less; certainly not more.

It took them through the tangle of high grasses, up gravel-strewn slopes, into the very hills toward which they had striven. Beth was carried, but Jeff walked. From time to time one of his captors sidled up beside him, peered at him curiously. One gathered the courage to reach out, touch the cloth of Jeff's jacket. Jeff grinned encouragingly.

"Like it, bud? Latest thing out of *Esquire*?"

But at his words the warrior leaped back, startled; brawny hands tightening on a wicked-looking club. Jeff made no further overtures.

And as they walked, the afternoon dulled with storm clouds gathering in the west. The slow sun drowned in seas of gray, a wind keened from the hills and buried itself deep in the grassy moors. The world was young and strange and it whispered of things unknown.

Beth's eyes opened, dark with terror till they found Jeff. Then they lighted.

"Jeff! You're all right?"

"Yep. Take it easy, gal. They're humans, and they seem to be friendly enough."

"Humans! But—" Beth stared at the dawn-folk incredulously. "But that's impossible, Jeff! Von Torp said a million years. There were no true men a million years ago. Only ape-like creatures. The Java man, the Heidelberg man. These men look like the Cro-Magnon type. Intelligent. But that type didn't exist until 25,000 B.C."

"Then they must be mirages," grinned Jeff. "Shall I wipe my eyes and make 'em vanish?"

"But I read all about it. In—"

"You believe what you read, don't you? If it's all the same to you, I'll believe what I see. I always did say those paleontologists were a bunch of phonies. They dig

up a molar, two ribs and a shin-bone, reconstruct the rest out of plaster and wire, and say, 'This is *homo whozis*. Period: April 7th, 547,862 B.C. Last seen riding a pterodactyl down Neolithic Boulevard.'

"Nope, it doesn't work that way, sugar. These guys are *men*, not monkeys. A little on the Tarzan side, perhaps, but still men. See that one over there? The one in the ox-hide G-string. He's laughing at us. Probably thinks we have a funny accent. Well, maybe he's right. But the fact is—he can think. And he can laugh. Man is the only animal with that ability. And," he added thoughtfully, "a good thing!"

Beth said dubiously, "Yes. Either that or von Torp made a mistake. His machine may not have been as efficient as he believed. But where are they taking us?"

"Home, I guess. To meet the Big Chief. The leader of this outfit seems to be puzzled by our appearance. We're a little something out of the ordinary, you know. And—I'm betting this is the metropolis now. Doesn't look much like Broadway, does it?"

THEY had rounded a sharp outcrop-ping of rock. And before and slightly above them had appeared, suddenly, a row of lodgings centered about a small cleared space. Lodgings was a poor word. They were really caves in the rocky ledge, some large, capacious, some mere niches. They were alike in that entry was afforded each by crudely lashed wood ladders, that each was guarded by a huge boulder so placed that in an emergency it could be hastily moved to barricade the cavern, and that in the mouth of each dwelling-place now stood men, women and children of the dawn-world community.

At the mouth of the largest cave stood a huge man, more elaborately bedecked than his fellows. There was about him, in his looks and in his rich, full voice, an aura of authority. He cried a command to the incoming party, and that party's leader answered. Beth's bearers set her down. Jeff moved to her side, and together they stood silently awaiting the inspection of the clan's chieftain.

It was a long inspection. It began with questions; phrases Beth and Jeff knew

to be queries only by the rising inflection of the clan-father's voice. The words were unintelligible; the language was apparently a rudimentary tongue for the clicks and grunts that characterized it were monosyllables.

Jeff shook his head. "Sorry, friend. We don't get it. Sign-talk, maybe?" He tried to remember what little he knew of this means of converse. It wasn't much. A circular rubbing motion on the belly signified hunger—but a hell of a lot of good it did him to know that.

Beth cried, "Jeff!"

The leader had transferred his attention to her. A scowl creased his forehead. He spoke a few, excited words to a companion and pointed at Beth's legs. Then he called out, and from the back of the huddled throng shuffled an aged woman. The others gave way before her as she advanced, moving aside with swift, repellent gestures, avoiding her touch.

It was not hard to see why. Her face, her arms and body, particularly her legs, were scabbed and scrofulous. A network of ugly veins empurpled her limbs where the skin was peeling away.

The leader pointed at her, then at Beth. There was a look of loathing on his face. He spoke a command, and the tribespeople fell away from Beth. One man raised a pointed stick. . . .

Light dawned on Jeff.

"Beth," he said suddenly, "take off your stockings!"

"What?"

"Take them off. Don't you see—they think you've got the same disease as this old crone. Leprosy . . . scrofula . . . eczema. . . . I don't know what it is. You're taboo. They'll drive you away, probably. Take them off!"

The girl nodded, bent over swiftly. The hose were in shreds anyway; she stripped them off with a quick motion, tossed them away.

A concerted gasp broke from the lips of her watchers. The one nearest to whom the hose had fallen howled and fled. Even the chieftain took a backward step, his eyes wide. Then a new look came over his face. Fear, mingled with vengeance and hatred. He raised a quivering arm, pointed at Beth.

"*Ngah!*" he cried. *Ngah lu!*" Then

broke into a perfect torrent of speech; voice hard and accusing.

"*Ngah!*" echoed the tribesmen. And as swiftly as they had retreated, they moved forward again. In an instant they had seized Beth, were hauling her forcibly toward the center of the clearing, where stood a squat stone fireplace. One man, at the leader's order, darted to the caves.

"Hey, wait a minute!" roared Jeff. "What is this?"

But no one paid him the slightest attention. Every eye was turned on Beth; every accusing mouth was hurling invective at her. Jeff's efforts to reach her side were met with angry shoves and glances. The messenger returned from the caverns. Dangling from his right fist was a long, limp object. At a word from the chieftain, he hurled this to the ground before Beth. And the cries redoubled in volume.

"*Ngah! Ngah lu!*"

And Jeff saw, at the same instant as the girl, what it was that the runner had brought from the caves. The body of a snake. Beth's voice rose shrill above the clamor of the tribe.

"Jeff—they think *I'm* a sort of snake, too! A—a snake-woman. When I took off my hose, they thought I peeled off my old skin, like a snake does. They—"

Their intention was plain. For suddenly the chieftain picked up the snake, whirled it thrice around his head, loosed a great, vengeful shout, and cast it into the baking coals of the fireplace. A brief, hissing crackle—and the snake was charred ash!

AND now a score of hands were eagerly heaping fuel on the central fire; making an altar, a pyre, of what usually must serve as a warmth- and cooking-place. Glowing embers kindled dry wood, dry wood spat bright tongues of flame; the pile grew higher and yet higher.

The blaze was fanning now. Soon it would be a red holocaust of flame. When it reached that point, Beth would share the slain snake's fate. Like it, she would be a sacrifice to the ignorance and fear of these aborigines.

Unless—

Jeff's mind worked at lightning speed. There was no sense in pitting his strength

against that of the dawn-men. Their weakest member would be more than a match for him. Nor could he, not knowing their language, argue with them.

Neither force nor reason, then, could stay them; a single hope remained. To play upon their fears. To somehow make them believe—Jeff started suddenly. He had it! His hands again sought the lining of his coat, the secret pocket in the increasingly valuable jacket of the professional man-of-magic. For a moment he could not find what he wanted; a fang of fear slashed through him. Had Lafferty forgotten?

Then the pellets were in his palm. A half dozen or more of them. Small, gray-brown pellets of a chemical composition known to any Twentieth Century adult. Jeff used them when giving benefit performances to children. They created a spectacular, harmless display.

These creatures who, even now, were dragging Beth closer and closer to the pyre were adult in size—but children in mind and thought. Beth's head turned, her eyes found his, her voice wailed, "Jeff—stop them! They—"

Jeff cried aloud, and raised his arm. The eyes of the tribesfolk sought his face; no one noticed that he threw, or that tiny brown pellets left his hand, flew toward the altar. They heard his voice, and followed the pointing of his finger.

"Rise!" cried Jeff. "Rise, O spirit of the Serpent. Rise!" It did not matter that they could not understand his words. His intonation was thunderously hollow, and his eyes flamed. His hands directed their attention; the fine, swift hands of the presidigitator. "Rise and come forth from the flame, O Serpent!"

And as at his command, something writhed in the red heart of the fire! Two . . . four . . . a half dozen gray, twisting bodies rolled and stretched and grew, began sliding from the flame that nourished them in thick, undulating curves.

A cry rose from the watchers. But hatred was gone from the cry, now. It was in sheer terror that they screamed. The chemical "serpents" grew, spread, seemed to crawl from the heart of the flame, wriggled over the altar; blind simulacra of life slithered across the ground.

THE cave-men fled. With fearful, awed struck bleats they scurried to their ladders. Within seconds, Jeff and the girl stood alone, unguarded, in a deserted clearing. Above them, squealing figures scrambled for the cave-mouths. Beth sobbed a sigh of relief.

"I take back everything I ever said, Maestro. From now on, parlor magic is my favorite sport. Let's get out of here before these Chemcraft snakes blow up and float away."

She reached for his hand. But a new thought came to Jeff McClary. He stopped her.

"Hold it! I've got a better idea. We're two babes in the woods out there. We might as well feather our nests while we can. Make a few friends—"

"What do you mean?"

"Watch!"

Jeff stepped forward. Once again his cry drew the attention of the tribesmen. Awed eyes watched as he bent to seize the foremost of the brown "crawlers" in his bare hand.

"Abracadabra!" intoned Jeff magnificently. "Tennesseevalleyauthority! Yoicks and tally-ho! Scram, snakes!"

And he made a swift, grinding gesture. The powdery "serpent" crumbled, became a thin, dusty film. He picked up the next, and the next . . . strode forward and trampled the remainder, grinding them to ash beneath his heel. The snakes vanished.

And Jeff stepped back, smiling triumphantly. Arms high, fists unclenched, he beckoned to the wide-eyed children of the dawn-world. And their leader read the right meaning into Jeff's gesture. He raised his own ham-like paws—and cautiously began to descend the ladder.

Those behind him took courage from his daring. One by one they deserted their perches. In the space of minutes, they were gathered before Jeff; a wide, semi-circle of awed, respectful humans. The chieftain moved nearer to Jeff. His lips were tense, but his manner purposeful. There was a sort of majesty to his movements; it was as if he offered himself as hostage for those he led. He muttered a word in pleading tones. Then his great knees bent—and he knelt in the dirt before Jeff.

Jeff moved to his side. A little moan

escaped the lips of the watchers. The chieftain did not stir, but there was perspiration on his brow and on his neck. And then—

Jeff placed a hand on the kneeling leader's elbow; gently raised him from his attitude of obeisance!

As he did so, breath returned to the onlookers like the rising of a swift breeze. Some tortured throat loosed a great cry of gladness; others took it up. Laughter rose and fell in cascades about them; loudest of all was the booming, shaken laughter of the reprieved chieftain.

With a joyful shout he charged forward. And before Jeff could stop him, the clan father was rubbing his broad, bearded face across Jeff's in an ecstasy of gratitude, friendship and abasement!

Jeff opened his mouth to protest, got a mouthful of coarse, sweaty hair, choked and pleaded, "Hey, cut that out! Beth—do something! Before he smothers me!"

But Beth was having troubles of her own. Like Jeff, she was the center of an admiring circle to each member of which the rubbing-of-faces seemed a paramount duty. Between gasps, "Don't look now," she cried hysterically, "but I think we've been elected honorary members of the tribe!"

VI

THUS Beth and Jeff, daughter and son of the Machine Age, became members of a Dawn World clan. And if their ways were a constant marvel to the cave-folk, no less strange were the ways of their new comrades to them.

Despite the apparent savagery of the caye community, its citizens had many refinements Beth and Jeff felt certain the Twentieth Century savants had not suspected. Light, for one thing. At nightfall, the two young adventurers were allotted sleeping space in a large, central cavern shared by a half dozen others; to their vast amazement they learned that the cave was kept dimly illuminated by spluttering animal-fat candles! Poor, ill-shapen things, true—but candles, nevertheless.

"And that in itself," mused Jeff, "is proof of their intelligence. When you stop to consider that candles were a standard means of illumination as late as our

17th Century! And—and look, Beth! On the wall! Those paintings!"

They were dull and indistinct in the candle's gleam. But Beth nodded excitedly.

"I thought we'd find something like that. They've found paintings like those in a half hundred places. Man's artistic sense developed early. You see, those paintings are *colored*, Jeff! There's one thing we must learn to do—and quickly! We must learn their language. It *can't* be hard!"

But it was more difficult than they expected. Their first—and for a long time their only—means of communication with the clans-folk was by signs. To their ears, for a long while, the tongue of the Oonts (for such they eventually learned to be the name of the tribe) sounded like nothing but the grating of tree-boughs in the wind, or—as Jeff put it—"Like the hokey agony of a pair of pro wrestlers!"

The tribal father was no help to them. Having done his part in inducting the two strangers into the clan, he proceeded to forget, with aboriginal ingenuousness, the terror which had caused him to do so and, indeed, their very existence! They sought help elsewhere; found it finally in the persons of two younger members of the clan. A girl who was called Luuma; a young man, 'Aka.

From these two, by the tedious process of pointing at objects and listening carefully to the syllable by which the instructors designated it, Beth and Jeff painfully began to accumulate a vocabulary. The nouns were not too difficult to establish, but for some time the verbs defied them. Nor did it make their problem any the easier that neither of them had ever studied the basic theories of philology.

But it was Beth who, finally, made the great discovery that smoothed their path to understanding.

"I'm beginning to see now, Jeff! We've been trying too hard to find true verbs in their sentences. The truth of the matter is—there are none! Except for those few onomatopeic verbs we've already distinguished. Like '*tlap*', for 'eat', and '*ongh*' for sleep—"

"Both," commented Jeff, "signs of good manners, no? If you don't smack your lips or snore like a hog—"

"They form their verbs," continued

Beth, "by putting two nouns together! For instance—you know their word for 'here'?"

"Umn."

"Yes. And 'there'?"

"Let's see. 'Nuk', isn't it?"

"That's right. Well—the verb 'to go' is 'umnuuk'! 'Here-there'. It also means 'to walk'. And 'to run' would be 'umnuuk-ul'... 'Here-there-wind'."

"And the past tense?"

"'Umnuuk-or'. 'Here-there sun'. One day ago. And if they mean two days ago they say, 'umnuuk-or-or'. See?"

Jeff solemnly raised her right arm above her head. "The winnah," he proclaimed, "and Dawn World champeen! Beth, I think you've got something there. And now, if you'll pardon me, I'll be on my way. I've got to—er—'umnuuk-ga-li-rrg!'"

"You—you've which?" repeated Beth. "Here-there-eye-man-dog—?"

"What a poor scholar!" Jeff shook his head. "Can't you understand plain Oont? I said I've got to see a man about a dog. . . ."

BUT Beth had found the key; it was not difficult now for the two young people to unlock the mysteries of the Oont language. And in doing so they won closer to the clans-folk than they had previously been able to do. They had been fed and housed as a matter of course; now, able to converse with their hosts, they entered directly into the life of the clan.

The tribe, they found, operated as a simple commune. Each man worked for the good of all. The men hunted, fished, made week-long voyages afield in search of edible fruits and grains; the women cooked, maintained a certain degree of sanitation about the caves, raised the children and tended a few domesticated animals. A lank-uddered creature with scrawny shanks and thick, shaggy hair in whose bony frame it was hard to envision the cow that would some day evolve. But it gave milk, a strong, curdy liquid that pleased the stomach even if it did not tempt the nostrils.

The women, too, scraped and tanned the pelts brought back from the hunt by their males. These they used as mats, as sleeping furs and clothing. Beth shrewdly bartered bits of her Twentieth Century cloth-

ing for these sturdier hides; a short time later she proudly presented Jeff with a garment similar to that worn by the other tribesmen.

Jeff put it on. When he strode from the cave, stood before Beth for inspection, he grinned ruefully, "How do I look?" he demanded. "As if I didn't know. And what do I use for pockets? Hell's bells—"

"You look," Beth told him frankly, "like Mr. Din. You know, G. Din, of Kipling fame? . . . 'nothin' much before, an' rather less than 'arf o' that be'ind.' But you'll get by. You *could* use a little more hair on the arms and legs. That seems to be fashionable around these parts. But these things will stand more wear and tear than the things we've been wearing. I forgot about pockets. I'll cut up your old coat and use the cloth."

"My old coat? Why not yours? Say, where is your old stuff, anyway? Not that you don't look O.K. in that fur ensemble, but—"

He stopped suddenly. Old Krua, one of the women with whom Beth had bartered, appeared from her cave. There was a proud smile on Krua's face; there was hauteur in her stride. She wore the expression of a woman who is wearing a Schiaparelli model—and knows it. She had a new decoration about her head. A headgear soft and colorful and filmy, and strangely out of keeping with harsh, primitive existence. A garment that billowed softly in the breeze as she walked. . . .

"Oh!" said Jeff. "Oh, I see!" And he grinned, no longer self-conscious in his abbreviated loin-clout. "Nice going, sugar. Still, you *might* have told her the right way to wear 'em."

"You," declared Beth stiffly, "are hateful!" And she blushed. It was, thought Jeff, a particularly attractive blush.

SO days sped by, and though they allowed themselves to be diverted by affairs of the clan, by the fulfilling of their own immediate needs, even by occasional periods of relaxation and amusement, Beth and Jeff never forgot the one important problem that confronted them. That of somehow returning to their own time.

"But to do that," said Jeff, "we must first locate von Torp. And so far we haven't been able to find hide nor hair of

him. Nor the cairn. 'Aka, you didn't have any luck today?"

The young warrior whom Jeff had enlisted in their cause shook his head. He spoke, as Beth and Jeff now quite fluently did, in the Oont tongue.

"The swamp is large, Snake-Killer. But we shall find the rocks-on-rocks some day. But the other No-Hair man—" He shook his head dubiously. "He is probably dead. None can live in there for long. None but they who talk with beasts."

"Who?" That was something new. "Who are they?"

'Aka rolled his eyes and spat. It was a sign Jeff recognized; the conventional action that bespoke something vile, unmentionable, distasteful to the Oonts.

"The little monkey-men, Snake-killer. Our enemies. The slant-heads. They are men-not-men. Being not-men they talk with the huge ones that scream."

Jeff stared at Beth curiously. "Doubletalk?" he hazarded. "Men-not-men?"

But there was a light of understanding in the girl's eyes.

"Maybe I know what he means, Jeff. Paleontologists say that the races of man did not follow each other in clean-cut succession; they overlapped. The primate evolved into the ape-man, a creature of rudimentary brain; this thing, in turn, gave way to a creature another short step higher in the scale of life—the Neanderthal man. Then, for thousands of years, the Neanderthal Man and the Cro-Magnon type waged war upon each other. The Cro-Magnon man, the true man, won out eventually because his was the greater intelligence. But it was a long and bitter and bloody period, because the Neanderthal man was the stronger and more bestial.

"These 'men-not-men' 'Aka speaks of may be the ape-like Neanderthaler. It is extremely likely that they should dwell in hidden, jungled places; quite possible they should speak the language of the reptiles—"

"But you said yourself—"

"I know. That the great reptiles should all have disappeared by now. But I was wrong, and the twentieth century students were wrong, too. They are not all dead. I've seen gigantic footprints in the ooze at the edge of the lowlands; we've all

heard their screaming at nights. Some still live. Dying remnants of a gross experiment that failed. And those few, if 'Aka is right, may have intercourse with the man-things on a lower plane than ours."

Jeff scowled. "Then in that case—" He stopped.

"Yes?"

"Nothing." He did not want to tell her his thought. That if the jungle were peopled with creatures like these—monsters of an even earlier age, ape-things whose friends the monsters were—then there was little hope indeed that von Torp still lived. And if von Torp were dead, then they were forever trapped in this age.

Were she to stop and consider, she would realize it herself. But hope is a spark that needs much quenching. So long as she did not realize, he would not tell her.

But they must not give up without making one final, strong bid for the restoration of the world they had known. He turned to 'Aka.

"'Aka, the men are home from the hunt. Our clan is strong and fearless. Will the men follow me into the marsh tomorrow? To make one last and thorough search for the heap of rocks-on-rocks, or the lost No-Haired One?"

'Aka said dubiously, "They fear the swamp, O Snake-Killer."

"I will pay them," Jeff tempted them. "I will give them a night of great joy. I will make for them the pebbles to disappear. The shells will hide in their mouths and ears and noses. I will even cause the flowers to bloom from old Krua's hairless pate."

'Aka's eyes sparkled. This was indeed temptation. Jeff's magic was a constant source of delight to the Oonts. One of which they never wearied. A full night of magic. . . .

"I shall speak to them, Snake-Killer. If they dare, we shall hunt tomorrow at sun-up."

the Oonts, armed for battle. Looking upon their weapons, Jeff felt oddly proud. For it was he who had brought to the tribesmen new inventions for the waging of war.

"Pretty good, eh?" he said to Beth. He slapped the stock of the weapon he bore. His fingers plucked a rawhide; it vibrated with a throaty, thrumming sound. "This ought to take care of any stray Neanderthalers, no?"

Beth sniffed disparagingly.

"You act as if you had invented it. After all, the cross-bow was in use as far back as the Tenth Century!"

"Which," pointed out Jeff, "won't come along for a million years, more or less. Interesting point there. Was I the original inventor of the cross-bow? If so, how come I learned about it in an age wherein it already existed when I was born? Which came first, the chicken or—?"

"Stop it. You're making me dizzy." Beth stared at their comrades-in-arms. "Are you sure they can handle those things? After all, they've only been using them for a day or so. Bows are tricky."

"Don't worry about that. These lads can handle anything that requires only strength and keenness of eye. 'Aka can crank this job, shaft it and lay an arrow into a bull's-eye before you can say *homo sapiens*. Well, it's light enough to get going. 'Aka!"

"Yes, Snake-Killer?"

"Divide the men. You take one party; I'll lead the other. We'll meet here when the hills swallow the sun. You know what to look for?"

"Yes, Snake-Killer."

"Good! Let's go, then."

The parties set off in opposite directions. Jeff's moved toward the lower part of the swamp. Dawn was still an echo, pale and distant, of the night it had vanquished. The sunlight dimmed as they entered the sucking fen; grim sounds of life rose about them; the Oont tribesmen glanced uneasily at the greasy waters, the massive, dripping ferns, clutched their new weapons tighter as for assurance. But they moved forward.

"I chose this direction," explained Jeff, "because I remember that when we ran from the swamp we were steadily moving

uphill. It's all a matter of luck, of course. Luck, and persistence. There may be miles of this swamp. But we know that somewhere is that cairn. And somewhere near it is—must be, if he is alive—von Torp. He can't desert it. It's the gateway to our own time.

"We must find him. Now that we have allies, we can build a duplicate machine. Return to—*What was that?*"

"That" was a sound that sent swift shudders running up and down the girl's back. Nor was she alone in her fears. The tribesmen halted in their tracks; one or two of them retreated a pace to Jeff's side; others looked nervously about as if seeking a place of refuge.

The sound was that of a pack in full cry. Snarling howls, the rasping of angry throats, and from afar—coming nearer with each passing moment—the splash of many racing feet.

Toek, ordinarily least fearful of the clansmen, was beside Jeff. He fingered his bow, darted swift glances back the way they had come.

"We are not safe here, Snake-Killer. It is they-who-run-in-packs."

Jeff's jaw tightened.

"We are as safe here as anywhere. Form as I taught you. Prepare your bows. Fire when I give the word."

Toek stirred rebelliously.

"They are mighty fighters—"

"So am I." Jeff stared him down. "Do as I say!"

Toek's eyes fell. He shrugged and turned away. In another moment he had gathered the clansmen together, formed them into the double line Jeff had taught them to use. An adaptation of the "British square," wherein the front line knelt to fire, the second line fired over their heads from a standing position.

Jeff took his place in the line, bow taut and ready, arrow resting in its channel. These were crudely hewn arms, but better than anything the cave-folk had ever known before. Jeff could have given them the simple long-bow. But this was more accurate.

The baying was very near now. And above the splash of racing feet, above the snarling of the pack, Jeff heard a second sound—the snuffling snort of an animal fleeing in terror. The thick, wheezy gasp-

ing of a beast straining itself beyond endurance. This, then, was the pursued. What it was, or what its pursuers, Jeff could not guess.

THEN the full drama burst upon them! From the dank tangle burst a tank-like figure, a flesh-brown creature about the size of a small rhinoceros, and not unlike that animal in appearance save that it had no horn; its only weapons were flaring tusks something like those of a wild boar. Heavy, unwieldy, its great pads sank in the morass with every step; only fear gave it the strength to pull itself free and shamble on.

The howling grew more shrill, more menacing—and the fern fronds were suddenly parted in a dozen places. Dim brown shapes appeared. Two . . . a half dozen . . . a score! Jeff looked upon the beast that ran in packs . . . the ancestor of the wolf. Larger, heavier built, with a broad, prehensile head and dripping fangs; blood-red of eye and singularly intent on the kill.

Someone gasped at Jeff's shoulder, and it was Beth.

"*Dromocyon vorax!* But it should not be in here. It is a plains animal. According to the books—"

"Never mind the books! Which is the more dangerous? We don't want the winner turning on us."

"They are! The—the wolf-things. The other one is *coryphodon hamatus*. An herbivorous swamp-creature."

"Okay!" Jeff spun to his followers. "Let 'em have it! The furry things. All right—now!"

And with the command, a score of cross-bows *spanged!* as one.

Not vainly had Jeff boasted of the archery ability of his dawn-men. Twenty shafts sped through the gloom—and twenty shafts found their marks in one or another of the wolf-beasts. The foremost, logical target, leaped high, howling once terribly, and that tensing of his muscles was his last move. He was dead even before his bristling body dropped back into the roiled waters. A half dozen more dropped silently, suddenly, in their tracks, dead of arrows that had found their hearts. One beast tumbled, screaming with pain, gnawing at an arrow that pierced his thigh

and tripped him as he would have fled. Another pawed, whimpering with strange, muted cries, at a shaft that locked his slavering jaws together; as he turned to run blindly from this weird foe, a second arrow bladed his breast. A bright circle of blood spilled from his clenched lips, he fell, kicked furiously for a moment, and lay still.

The grotesque amblyopod fled on, unknowing that its pursuers lay stricken with sudden death. A single furry cur raced after it; for a time the splash of feet echoed through the swamp, the baying of a lone wolf—then there was deathly silence.

Silence even from the Oont tribesmen. For a moment. Then the realization of what they had done burst upon them with shattering force. Jeff could see the dazed incredulity in their eyes turning to glad surprise . . . then to pride . . . and to joy.

They, weak bipeds who, heretofore armed only with crude sticks and stones, had ever fled for their very lives before the savage beasts of plain and jungle, had become the masters of all creation! New arms had been given them; long, shafted arms with which they could strike terror to all who defied them.

It was a heady knowledge. Toek opened his lips and shouted aloud. It was a shrill, a challenging cry. It was the cry of man, realizing, for the first time, that he is to rule the world. His fellows took up the shout. Pride there was in their rejoicing, pride and glory and daring. Their eyes were aglow, and a new, subtle lift had come into their shoulders.

No more did they skulk and face the swamp with dim, uncertain eyes. They gathered about Jeff, gesturing, clamoring, boasting. "Did you see, Snake-Killer? Three I slew!" "—one motion of my arm, O Snake-Killer, and—" "Let now the men-not-men approach us; we will show them—"

Jeff smiled. There was no longer reason to doubt the valor of his comrades-in-arms. Strength they had always had; with this new assurance to bolster it—

"Our search is not yet ended," he said, "nor even begun. Let us be on our way. Forward!"

And forward moved the march.

DAWN turned to morning, morning brightened to noon. The heat of the day came down to meet the stifling, rising sultriness of the swamp; the fen-stench thickened and sluggish creatures lazed in pools of turgid water.

Still the quest continued, but with each dragging hour Jeff's spirits fell another notch. Nowhere in all the miles they had covered had he seen anything, any sight, any scene, that reminded him of the spot wherein von Torp's time machine had first abandoned them.

Their march was not without incident. Once as they passed beneath a huge live-oak, a sinuous pseudo-branch uncoiled itself and slithered out, great pendulous head dripping toward the back of one of the unsuspecting warriors.

There was no time to cry out. Jeff had only time to raise his ready cross-bow, take hasty aim and loose the bolt. Even as the great snake opened its jaws, the arrow whirred to its mark. Thick ichor spurted from the thing's nostrils, the warrior screamed, leaped backward to safety; then the snake, its tiny brain pierced by the lethal arrow, flailed into motion like a gigantic, many-jointed scythe.

Its yards-long tail threshed through the ferns like the whip of doom, water churned and thick branches snapped before it, and the little band of searchers fled. How long it took to die, they did not know; it was still twisting and rolling in its death agony after the last of them had passed it by.

Again a giant turtle, its shell-plated carcass ten feet in diameter if an inch, attracted their attention. It was crawling with painful slowness from the soft mud to the waters; beneath its weight the mud shifted and gave, making its progress even slower. Toek tested his new weapon on it, but that armored back shattered the slim shaft, sent it ricochetting off into the underbrush. For a time, the others amused themselves by striving to place a shaft in one of the monster's few vulnerable spots; an eye, or the roll of soft flesh where its throat joined its nether shell. But at last the turtle, petulant at the tiny, jarring motes that rained upon it, withdrew into its shield and would not come forth. So they moved on.

And noon gave way to steamy after-

noon; the rays of the sun struck pearls of rose and scarlet on the oily waters, then these and all colors began to dull as dusk gathered in the west. And Toek came to Jeff.

"It is time that we turn back, O Snake-Killer. It will soon be night. We must leave the swamp."

And Jeff sighed.

"I guess you're right. Lead the way, Toek. Up to higher ground. We'll return—"

"Jeff!"

"Yes?"

"Listen! Over there to the right. The sound of a voice. And—and hammering?"

She was right! New hope sprang suddenly into Jeff's eyes. "Wait here! I'll see!" He darted through a veil of heavy fern, fought clear of bull-briers that clustered at his shoulders, his legs, broke through a final barrier of green. And then—

And then he was once again in a spot he remembered! The clearing where they had lost von Torp. Lost him—and now found him again!

For as he struggled through the brush, a heavy figure turned to face him; a familiar face stared at him across open rods; surprised eyes appraised him with vast wonder. A glad cry leaped to Jeff's lips. He sprang forward. "You're safe, von Torp! Thank Heaven! We were afraid—"

Von Torp cried swifter warning. "Stand still, you fool! Another step and you will die!"

VIII

JEFF stared at the man. Then, eyes roving slowly, he saw that which, in his eagerness, he had not noticed before.

Von Torp was not alone in the marshy glen. He had companions. Scores of them. Squat, hairy, slant-browed creatures, ape-like, naked save for the fur that covered them from crown to heel. Long-armed, splay-fingered, with thumbs too short to be brought into apposition; bandy-legged.

As he watched, spell-bound, the silence shattered. From the throats of the mad scientist's companions broke a bedlam of squealing chatter. It was like the high and

nasal scolding of a Capuchin monkey, but there was something ominous about it, too. Evil, threatening, direful.

Then von Torp cried a syllable—and the chattering ceased! With it ended, at the same moment, the slow, sidling motion with which a half-score of the ape-creatures had been closing in on Jeff. They froze in their tracks, obedient to the German's command. And von Torp smiled. It was not nice to look upon, that smile.

"My acquaintances are zealous protectors. Were I not here to stop them, Herr McClary, they would tear you into bits."

Jeff gasped, "The—the Neanderthalers!"

"Ah, you recognize them? Your erudition amazes me, almost as much as your appearance. You appear—" Here his eyes studied Jeff's garb with covert amusement "—to have reverted to type. Crude garments. And a weapon! *Ach*, how we adopt ourselves, *nicht wahr?*"

Then his tone changed abruptly, a note of concern dominated his query.

"But the girl? Where is she?"

"She—" Jeff was on the verge of admitting Beth's presence, of telling von Torp about the band of Oonts waiting for him within earshot distance. But the bell of caution was ringing softly; he temporized. "She is safe. Why?"

"You must get her. You must bring her here."

"Why?"

"You must get her." Von Torp repeated the words in a thick monotone; Jeff noted with gathering amazement how his eyes seemed to have glazed, become hard and worried. And, as before, he realized suddenly how perilously close to violent insanity was the scientist's genius. "You must bring her to me."

"And," suggested Jeff, "if I don't?"

The dam burst. Von Torp's neck swelled, crimson suffused his broad features.

"But you will! Young fool, do you still not realize that I, von Torp, am master here? Behold, out of time's dawn I have conquered these ape-like savages, learned their tongue, made them obedient to my will! At my command, they will tear you to bits. They will—"

"You said that," Jeff told him grimly,

"before. Now listen, von Torp. I came seeking you in peace and amity. You have the brains to get us out of this mess, and Beth and I understand that. We were quite willing to help; we even got laborers for you.

"But apparently you have other ideas. And I think I know what those ideas are . . . and why you're so damn' anxious to know where Beth is. Well, I don't like your ideas.

"So long. Much as we'd like to return to our world, we're not going to play patsy to you, lay ourselves open to the good old double-x again—"

"You have been warned!" roared von Torp. He lifted an arm; crisped guttural syllables to his followers. "Alone I shall find the *fraulein*; she shall share your fate—"

With his cry, the host of gnarly men came scrambling forward. But Jeff was not caught napping. Now he, too, lifted his voice in a great shout; words in the tongue of the Oont tribesmen spilled from his lips.

"Toek . . . Beth . . . my warriors! To me!"

It was as if the jungle had been awaiting his cry to spring to life. Instantly the fronded ferns rasped as bodies thrust boldly through them; water splashed; friendly voices shouted in reply; and where had been lush green, now were the figures of his comrades. Tall, strong figures, grim, erect, armed and ready.

The charging Neanderthalers whirled, startled. And seeing, thus limned at the jungle's rim, their traditional enemies, they forgot Jeff. Race hatred, wild and ravenous, seized them. With shrieks and howls they turned, broke toward the oncoming Cro-Magnons!

TOO late von Torp's intelligence fore-saw the inevitable outcome. In vain he bellowed orders for their retreat. Blood-lust, the hatred of bestial near-man for his superior, blinded the hairy ones to everything save the desire to kill. Like a brown wave they flooded toward Jeff's followers.

And like the dwindling edge of the ebb-tide wave, wasting itself to nothingness on the adamant breast of the beach, they died! Toek's voice was hot and fierce as

he put the command. A score of arrows scraped as they slid back in a score of stocks. Full twenty bow-strings *spangled!* as one. And shafts of feathered death whirred unerringly to a score of hearts.

It was no battle; it was a rout, a slaughter! Once more Toek cried command; again deft fingers placed arrows in crossbows; again howling ape-men collapsed into the slimy waters of the swamp, clutching with lifeless paws at breasts from which slim shafts protruded. A single Neanderthal man managed to find his prey; Jeff saw then, and horribly sickened to see, why ever before the Oonts had dreaded the apemen. Clawed hands were flailing weapons; like a snarling cat the hairy man-thing hurled itself upon its opponent, ragged nails shredded the Oont tribesman's face, tore bloody sockets where his eyes had been. Blood-dappled claws dug lower, ripped at soft flesh, disemboweling the hapless Cro-Magnon.

He died, screaming like a stricken animal. But the Neanderthaler died with him. It was Jeff's arrow that thudded into the ape-man's back, transfixing him to swift death, smashing through his body into the suffering heart of the true man to bring both warriors down, locked in grim, loveless embrace.

But that was the Oonts' only casualty. Neanderthal hatred was great, but Neanderthal courage could not dare this new weapon, the whisperer-that-struck-from afar. Their tone changed, their cries were suddenly no longer howls of rage but whimperings of terror. Wide-eyed and slavering, the remainder turned and fled. Prehensile arms, in this emergency, bespoke the beast ancestry. Scrambling on all fours, the Neanderthalers raced, splashing, from danger. Into the trees, into the thorny thickets, anywhere. . . .

Jeff lowered his bow. He brushed the hair back from his eyes, wiped sweat from a dripping forehead.

"You all right, Beth? Nic: work, Toek! You showed 'em that time. Von Torp—he got away, did he?"

The others encircled him now.

"He was the first to run," Beth told him. "I could have shot him. Any of us could. But I stopped Toek. Everything happened so suddenly. I didn't know if he was friend or enemy or what I should do.

And he's the only one who can get us back to our time. . . ."

"You should have killed him," said Jeff somberly. "He meant to kill you."

"What do you mean?"

JEFF drew a long breath. "I hate to tell you this, sugar. But you might as well know the truth. If von Torp was our last chance of ever getting home again—and he *was*—then we're stuck here forever!"

"For—" The word stuck in Beth's throat; it came out, finally, harsh and dry. "Forever?"

"Yes, Beth. Do you see that?"

He pointed to a crude wooden framework behind him. It was a sort of raised dais. It was vaguely reminiscent of—of something Beth Anderson had seen a long while ago. A raised dais with four uprights. She stared at it, puzzled. Then she gasped.

"His new time machine! He was trying to build one!"

And Jeff nodded unhappily.

"Yes. He was trying. But don't you see how pitifully inept his efforts were? When I saw that, Beth, I began to realize the truth. When von Torp spoke to me, I knew I was right. For his looks, his tone, his demands—"

"Yes?"

"He is completely mad," said Jeff simply. "It has been too great a strain for him. His genius has collapsed into a weird monomania. He did not—as he once said he would—organize his Neanderthal cohorts to find ore, refine the metals with which he might have some day, years hence, succeeded in constructing a new machine. No. In his madness he set about constructing a useless replica of his machine; a *wooden* one.

"Vestiges of his once-great mind remain. He earned the allegiance of the ape-men, how, I cannot guess. Perhaps he realized, in some dim corner of his mind, the fruitlessness of his efforts—"

Here a sudden, startling thought struck Jeff.

"Yes! Perhaps he realized that the machine was not ever destined to be finished. This framework in the jungle could be the throne from which he planned to rule his brutal subjects.

"And that would explain why he asked—insisted!—that I get you, bring you to him! Knowing he was doomed to finish the rest of his days as overlord of man-beasts, he intended to have a mate at his side. A woman. Yourself!"

"Jeff!"

Beth shuddered. Then the color flooded back into her cheeks.

"That spells the end of our hopes, then?"

"I'm afraid so, Beth. I—I'm sorry."

She forced a smile.

"There's nothing we can do about it. And Jeff—"

"Yes?"

A long moment of silence. Then her voice, strangely golden in the swiftly gathering dusk.

"I should be sorry, too. And in a way, of course, I am. But in another way—if this is the way things must be—I'm not altogether sorry."

Then Toek was at their sides, interrupting the first moment in weeks out of which Jeff McClary might have drawn a measure of sweetness. His mien was restless.

"We must go now, Snake-Killer. The black comes."

Jeff nodded. "Lead the way, Toek. We will return and fortify the town."

Beth stared at him wonderingly. "Fortify the town, Jeff? But why?"

"Von Torp is not yet dead. And I made the mistake of telling him our village was in the hills. Knowing him as I do, I am afraid we have not yet seen the last of him."

IX

OLD KRUA had let the fire go out again. It was getting to be a habit with her. In the old days, before Snake-Killer and his woman had come to join the clan, the chieftain would have punished her for letting the flame die. That was how her nose had become flattened.

But it was so easy for Snake-Killer to make a fire. He was magic, he was a god, like the light-that-flashes-in-the-rain, like the voice-that-repeats from the mountains. He used to make fires just by rubbing tiny twigs on stones. Now he had no more tiny twigs, but he had other ways.

He had even taught her a way, but it

was a long and tedious one. But—she glanced up, saw Jeff coming down the trail—she had to pretend she was trying. Again she took the bow in her hands, scraped it laboriously back and forth across the spindling stick. It spun slowly, the end of the stick warming, charring, but not glowing. She continued to bend over the drill, whirling it with diligent unenthusiasm, until Jeff stopped beside her. Then she looked up.

"Greetings, O Snake-Killer!" Ruefully, "The flame will not awake. It is drowsy. It is lazy."

"*You are lazy!*" corrected Jeff. "I should beat you, Krua, for a worthless hag. But give it here!"

He took the bow-and-drill, spun it deftly. Spinning drill flaked a point of carmine into a nest of tinder. Jeff scooped up the tinder, whirled it briskly above his head till it burst into flame, tossed it beneath the heaped faggots on the fireplace. Twigs crackled and the fire grew.

"If you let the fire die again," scolded Jeff, "the chieftain will feed you dried bones and dung, O stupid one!"

Krua's ancient lips cracked in a toothless grin. A belly of thunder had Snake-Killer, but a heart of tallow. A little boy romped up to Jeff, tugged at his thigh. "Find a shell in my ear, O Snake-Killer? Find a shell in my ear?"

Jeff laughed, made motions of surprise, and found a shell in young Juba's ear. Young Juba raced away triumphantly to show his playmates his new acquisition. And Beth spoke from behind Jeff.

"So this is how you spend your time? Tending fires for Krua and doing tricks for the children?"

"The north gate is finished. We're going to start work on an aqueduct tomorrow. I've knocked off for the rest of the day. Union hours, sugar—even in the Dawn World!" Jeff pointed proudly at the barricade over which he and his helpers had been working for the past week. "But how's your garden coming along? Any results?"

Beth sighed in mock resignation.

"Luuma got up at dawn this morning to see how our vegetables were doing. She couldn't tell anything by the size of the shoots, so she pulled them all up—"

"That won't do!"

"I know. I scolded her. Told her that next time I would plant *her* with the seeds. It's a hard job, Jeff, trying to teach them. They're just like children. All their lives they've eaten whatever fruits, grains, vegetables, they found in abundance. When one section runs short of food they move to another. They haven't the faintest idea what animal husbandry is, or sowing of seeds, or crop-raising."

"We must teach them. It's our duty, Beth. We won't always be here to help them with these things. We must teach them all we can, hoping they'll remember a little— Oh, 'Aka? What did you find out?"

The young tribesman stopped before him, bowing soberly.

"It is not good, Snake-Killer. They are gathering. Many tribes of them."

"In the swamps, eh? I thought so. They'll raid us when von Torp has overcome their fears, and when he believes they're strong enough. Did you see the big No-Haired One?"

"No, Snake-Killer. But I saw the Mighty Ones."

"The Mighty Ones?"

"The screamers that walk like thunder. Many of them. The men-not-men have brought them in to help."

"What does he mean, Jeff?"

"Got me. Well, all right, 'Aka. Run along. I'll see you later." And as the warrior scout disappeared, "From now on, we've got to keep on our toes. Von Torp is planning to raid us, sure as shooting. If and when he does, get the women to the caves. I've got the men trained. They'll take the posts I set for them—I hope!"

"And what are you going to do with von Torp?"

Jeff said slowly, "Capture him if possible. Good food and treatment may some day restore his intelligence; we have to gamble on that. But if matters should ever reach a showdown, our lives against his, there's only one answer."

Beth nodded. The world in which she had been Beth Andreson, sob-sister, wise-cracker and iconoclast, the world in which this tall, bronzed leader had been a professional 'ghost-buster' was a far, forgotten memory. She moved into the shelter

of his arm. He was Snake-Killer. And she was Snake-Killer's woman.

AND that night, as every night, there was a guard. That night and the next, and the next. But not then, nor any night, did the expected attack come.

Mad von Torp might be. But his madness was guileful and crafty. He chose the moment for his bid at the hour when his forces might least have been expected, when watchfulness was at its nadir. And the method of his coming, when he came, was more dreadful than the tribesmen had expected.

High noon was drowsing time. In this young world, where sun and earth were newer, nearer, warmer, the scalding heat of midday was siesta-time. Even the innumerable foes of warring nature called truce to their relentless battling when the sun ruled the zenith. The cave-beasts sought the cool depths of the hills, fish lay sluggish in shaded pools, even small insects halted their incessant scurrying.

At this hour the Oonts' vigilance was detailed to a handful of lethargic souls. Even Jeff saw no harm in this. Nothing moved at midday. It was illogical to believe von Torp would dare a blazing sun as well as a strong opponent.

Illogical, yes. But he did!

Into the darkness of the cave where Jeff lay napping came the first warning. There was peace and stillness, soft quiet—then suddenly there were none of these! There was a voice crying out, many voices taking up the cry, the trample of racing feet, and a strange and ominous quaking of the earth on which Jeff lay.

Then Gluk, one of those who had been stationed as a watchman, bursting into his cave.

"Swiftly, O Snake-Killer! They have come!"

Instantly, Jeff was awake and on his feet. His hand groped for and found his cross-bow; he cast swift words over his shoulder to Beth.

"Rouse the women; lead them to a safe place. Don't come outside! It won't take long. How many of them, Gluk?"

Gluk's eyes rolled fearfully.

"They are as the leaves on the trees, O Snake-Killer! And—and the little ones who-speak-with-beasts have brought with

them the Mighty Ones. The thunderers!"

"Thunderers?" There it was again. But Jeff had no time, now, to determine the meaning behind Gluk's fanciful speech. "Come!" he cried—and with Gluk following, he sped to the barrier he and the tribesmen had constructed. As he ran, other warriors, sleepy-eyed, sweating and cross, joined him. Jeff noted with approval that one and all had clenched in their fists their cross-bows. That alone should prove the deciding factor in the battle.

Unless, he thought suddenly, von Torp had provided his allies with the same weapon?

But that was a bootless fear. For one thing, the primate paws of the Nenderthalers were not adapted to a weapon requiring manual dexterity. Clubs and stones, teeth and nails, were their natural weapons. And, too, there was the barricade surrounding the Oont village.

"One thing remember!" Jeff warned his followers. "I want the big No-Haired one alive! Capture him; do not kill him!"

And then he was at the main gate; a high structure of cross-barred timbers locked across the rocky defile which faced the only approach from lower ground. He was climbing up the rough beams to a vantage point, staring down, viewing for the first time the attackers von Torp had organized, and his eyes leapt open with swift, sudden horror!

Ape-men there were, true! Not dozens of them, nor scores—but two hundred, possibly more! And with them was von Torp. But it was not the fierce, gloating smile on the mad scientist's face that touched Jeff's heart with dread; it was not the clamorous, blood-hungry howling of the Neanderthalers, it was not the sight of the weapons with which they menaced the breach.

It was something else. It was the sight of the weird, ungainly steeds on which the foremost attackers rode. Gigantic parodies of lizarddom, fully forty-five feet in length, thrice as tall as a man, weirdly anthropomorphic as they raced forward on massive hind limbs, futile, tiny fore-limbs dangling grotesquely before them, great tails crushing the earth over which they flailed.

It was on these monsters the Neander-

thalers crouched, bandy legs tightly clenched to gross, reptilian withers. And as they rode they spoke in coarse and reedy voices—and the beasts answered in kind!

There was a stifled cry at Jeff's shoulder. Beth's voice in his ear.

"*Tyrannosaurus!* Jeff, the largest, the most powerful of all dinosaurs—!"

JEFF whirled. It was concern, not anger, that made his voice flaming hot, that caused his brow to darken and his thrust to be so violent.

"What are you doing here? I told you to—"

"I couldn't stay in the caves. I heard the screams; I knew—or guessed—what they had done. Jeff, don't you understand? We are destroyed! We—"

"Don't talk nonsense! They're in the open. We're protected. We still have our barricade."

"They'll crush it like a paper box! They—they're like huge, armored tanks, Jeff. Not even your weapons will stop them. Arrows are useless—"

Even as she spoke, Jeff's eyes found evidence that her words were true. The attackers were still far down the incline, at their mounts' lumbering pace it would take them many minutes to reach the wall, but one of the Oonts, unable to restrain himself longer, had grooved a shaft, let fly at the foremost dinosaur.

The slim arrow sped swift and true to its mark. It struck the horny pate of the onrushing lizard with blinding force and accuracy—and shattered! The dinosaur squealed fiercely, shook its massive head—and plunged on!

And Jeff's heart sank. The thunder of giant hoofs woke a fearful echo in his heart. Beth was right! Von Torp had gained a potent ally. Even this gate could not withstand the crushing impact of those tons of armored flesh. One blow would shake it to its foundations. A second and a third . . .

"The big cross-bow!" he thought, and leapt along the wall to where a huge cross-bow, operated by primitive windlass, stood in a natural embrasure in the cliff. Quickly he took aim at the neck of the nearest monster. With trembling fingers he pulled the pin that set the thick, rawhide bow-

string twanging. Even above the squealing of the ape-men Jeff could hear the *thuck* of the feathered shaft. His taut face lighted with hope, but the light faded. The thick shaft penetrated the horny hide perhaps an eighth of its length, but the hideous lizard plunged ahead.

Jeff opened his clenched fists in a gesture of despair. What more could he do? There was always something. . . . Think fast, McClary, he told himself.

"The riders!" he cried in a suddenly cracked voice. "Aim for them! The men-not-men!"

Now every warrior was busy with bow and shafts. And obedient to his command, eyes concentrated on the squat, hair-matted figures crouching on the dinosaurs' necks. Arrows impelled by mighty arms flew across the ever dwindling distance like a feathered rain. And found their marks! Ape-men cried their swift, astonished agony, and tumbled from their monstrous chargers like crimson-stemmed, writhing balls of fur. One fell beneath a lizard's descending foot; Jeff could not take his dreadfully fascinated eyes from the spot where he had fallen. When the hoof left the earth again, that which it left behind was nauseous and grim.

And as if a judging hand had suddenly erased the chattering excrescences from the reptiles' armored throats, the ape-men were gone! Yet the host of *tyrannosauri*, fully a dozen of them, continued to obey their last command. Like mighty machines incontrollably set into motion, they charged forward. But a few hundred yards lay now between them and the barricade. Behind them, dancing impatiently, howling in desire to follow their fleshly tanks through the breach, the mob of ape-men waited.

Jeff's lips were white, his brow furrowed with the agony of fruitless thought. There was no way from this dilemma. Only in flight lay safety, but even in flight, many of his tribesmen and friends would find death. How to?

And Beth was sobbing, tugging at his shoulder.

"Jeff, we can't stand up against them! We've got to run! Give the order. Tell the men to stop firing—"

"Firing!" The word slashed its way across the portals of Jeff's thought. "Fire!"

That's it! *Fire!* Toek . . . 'Aka . . . Gluk . . . to me!"

He wrenched himself from the girl's grasp. Her cry followed him as he clambered down the wall, leaped across the clearing.

He reached the altar-place where blazed the huge community fire of the tribe. A woman tended the fire, a woman proudly garbed in a thick, hairy cave-bear pelt. With ruthless hands Jeff seized the garment, ripped it from her back!

She screamed once in outraged anger, then saw that her accoster was Snake-Killer, and stopped screaming. Like Beth, on the gate above, she stood watching in mute astonishment as Jeff tore a strip from the pelt, wrapped it hastily about an arrow, thrust arrow and hairy wad into the flame.

It caught, glowed, blazed! Jeff thrust the burning shaft into his bow, tensed, loosed it! It arced over the barricade—and squarely into the face of the foremost dinosaur!

The dinosaur screamed!

XI

THE dinosaur screamed—and its tiny eyes glowed red and blood-shot fearful with the impact of that flaming mass! For the first time it faltered in its charge. It halted in its tracks, tiny forelegs waving impotently, scraping in sudden panic at its lowered head.

A second beast, behind it, stumbled into it, squealed and nipped at the rump of the beast before. The first one turned blindly, angrily, slashed with six-inch teeth at its comrade's slavering jowls!

And Beth understood! In an instant, she was leaping from the wall, hastening to Jeff's side. She took the hairy pelt from his hands, began tearing it into foot-long strips. 'Aka and Toek, a half dozen of the other warriors, had come to them now. Jeff grunted swift approval to Beth.

"Nice going! Get some women to help you. And get more furs. Form a fire-bucket line to pass 'em along. I'm going topside. Come on, men!"

Thus began the defense of the village. The bowmen on the parapet, their women laboring below to supply them with the one ammunition which the lizard-creatures

dared not face. The licking tongue of flame!

Success came quicker and more overwhelmingly than they had dared hope. Blinded, hurt, bewildered by the flood of burning shafts that suddenly began raining down upon them, the riderless dinosaurs first hesitated, then fought amongst themselves—then fell back in complete rout!

Squealing shrill bleats of terror, they turned and fled down the path up which they had come. Not all fled, for as they ran they slashed at each other with tooth, claw and scything tails. The Oont tribesmen, jubilant, refused to let the fight die thus. With shouts of boastful triumph they swung open the great gate; it was Jeff who was first to pass through it, meet the confused ex-foe face to face. It was his final arrow, bright ribbon of flame flashing squarely into the snarling mouth of the last, defiant dinosaur, that completed the fray. The blazing brand found its mark in the fleshy palate of the beast; suddenly the tyrannosaurus went berserk with pain, charged through and past its brethren and down into the ranks of waiting ape-men!

Then there was bedlam indeed! For von Torp's most dreadful weapon turned Frankenstein, ten pain-torn, baffled juggernauts were turned loose amongst their own companions. Vainly the Neanderthalers cried commands in the beasts' own laborious tongue, vainly they turned and fled down the hill, into the fields, into trees and crevices and into whatever refuge they could find.

Pounding hoofs, hag-ridden, pressed their fleeing flesh to pulp. Screams of torment rent the air. And there still hailed down about the ape-men an unceasing storm of flaming shafts.

A mad savagery had gripped Jeff McClary. His thin veneer of civilization stripped away from him completely in this moment of victory. His cries were the wild ululations of his comrades as he pressed forward on the death-dealing pursuit, his arm was strong with the strength of a thousand hatreds as he loosed thin death into their breaking ranks.

Now the flight went far afield. Across the grassy plains, toward the swamps that lay, turgidly noisome, below. And it would

have been sane to stop, but there was no sanity in Jeff McClary now. Because fleeing before him was a figure he recognized. A figure taller, sturdier, more erect than those of the shattered ape-men.

Von Torp! Somehow he had again escaped the punishment he so richly deserved. But not for long! Not if Jeff had to meter out that punishment with his bare hands.

And he would have to do just that. For his arrows were gone, now. His source of armaments lay far behind him; his fellow tribesmen, his comrades-at-arms, were broken into a score of pursuit parties. He tossed away his useless bow. He was alone. He would follow and find von Torp even if it meant scouring the swamp for him. He was alone.

No, not alone. For there—as ever when he needed help and courage—was Beth, coming up from behind him. A wild-eyed, dishevelled Beth, her own garment shredded where wads had been ripped from it to feed the bowsmen's needs.

She was crying, "Turn back, Jeff! We've won! Come back—"

But he shook his head.

"We'll never win until we finish him! If this must be our world forever, we'll make it a clean world. I've got to get him! Go back and wait for me."

But that she would not do. She followed. And down led the pursuit, into the mud-choked stream, out through the tangle of thorny-brush, into the swamp again.

VON TORP knew, now, that he was followed. He knew, too, his pursuers. And at the last, his mad brain must have worked like that of the hurt child, the wounded animal. He fled unerringly toward the spot that drew him like a magnet, the spot wherein they three had landed, the spot whereon he had built his futile dais—machine or throne?—and gained overlordship of a dying race that spoke with lower beasts.

And at the spot, like a trapped rat, he turned to face his followers for the last time. His face was a mask of frightened fury, there was no intelligence in his eyes. Only the baffled look of a man who looks on certain death.

Jeff burst into the clearing where he

waited. And the meeting of the two men was like the clashing of two wild beasts. Soundless. No word passed between them. No offer of peace or quarter, no plea, no challenge. But their two bodies tensed; something like a snarl broke from von Torp's gaping mouth, and Jeff's lips gave answer. Then they were rushing together, arms locking in deadly embrace.

Subconsciously, Jeff had always recognized von Torp to be a strong man. How strong, he had not known until the moment he felt the German's breath hot against his face, the madman's arms meeting his in ultimate conflict. Then, with the pressure of those powerful arms forcing his spine backward, feeling his knees buckle beneath him, Jeff McClary knew his blood-lust had led him, at last, to the battle which was the difference between life and death.

There was no form or no formality to that battle. With fists, with knees and fingernails they fought. With all the strength and technique and cunningness which either knew. Once Jeff thought he had his man; that was the time he forced von Torp's head into the slimy mud of the swamp, grim fingers tensed upon the madman's windpipe, determined to choke life forever from those treacherous lips.

But von Torp's knee in his groin was lightning and tempest and a white knife torturing the blood in his veins. He was doubled and helpless there for a long moment, and his life might have paid for that moment had not von Torp, too, been weakly gasping the water from his lungs.

And both were staggering as they returned to grips.

Back and forth swayed the pendulum of victory. It was Jeff's when he had his adversary pinned across the bole of a tree, but somehow von Torp's flailing hand found a rock, and Jeff fell back, stunned by a blow on the temple that almost crimsoned the gray-green scene before him. It was at that moment that von Torp might have won, had it not been for Beth. Her scream halted his hand descending for the second time, and before he could swing again, she was upon him, a blind, scratching, clawing Fury fighting for the life of her man.

And consciousness came back to Jeff. He came again to his feet, white with

rage, and he spoke the first words of the conflict.

"So that," he said thickly, numbly, "so that's the way it's to be, eh? Well, two can play at that game—"

His delving fist found a weapon, a cudgel as thick around as a man's fist. He moved toward von Torp. And as if the sound of a voice had suddenly erased the clouds of insanity from the German's brain, his eyes leaped open in stark fear. He broke away from Beth, backed farther from Jeff.

"*Ncint!*" he screamed. "*Kamerad!* *Kamerad!*"

But he found no mercy in Jeff's eyes. And finding none, the last vestige of his false courage fled. Crying in terror, he turned and fled again, splashing, stumbling into the dank depths of the swamp.

Jeff started after him. But he had not realized his own weakness. His knees trembled beneath him, he felt himself falling forward on his face. A vision flashed before his eyes . . . it was a vision of delirium or madness, for it seemed that suddenly the crude framework dais broke sharply into a thousand pieces, and in its place there was a vague and shadowy something that gathered solidarity with each passing moment.

He heard Beth's cry, and her voice spoke meaningless syllables into his ears. He felt her hands beneath his armpits, dragging his limpness across the sucking swamp; he remembered a moment of keen, stinging pain—then blackness. And in the ebon eternal his lips framed a name.

"Beth. . . ."

A EONS away a voice spoke. A remembered voice. It said, "—nk this!" And then there was something fiery in his throat. He gasped and spluttered and opened his eyes. A second voice spoke, saying, "He'll be all right now—"

It was delirium, of course. It could be nothing else. For before him was the face of Beth, radiantly smiling, and beyond Beth's face was the brilliance of an electric light, the gleam of light on metal!

It was delirium, or he had died. And this was the heaven of his dreaming; the world he had once known, had one time lived in and lost.

He struggled to sit up. And firm hands pressed on his shoulders.

"Take it easy, Chief! You'll be okay in a mo—"

That voice!

This time he would not be denied. He sat upright, staring about him with incredulous eyes. He gasped, "It—it's you! Lafferty! The laboratory! Von Torp's—" Lafferty's face came into focus.

"That's right, Chief. It's me. You want another drink to settle your—?"

Jeff pushed the glass away, and his eyes sought and found Beth's.

"How?" he demanded simply.

"I don't know. He came—*like that!*" She snapped her fingers. "You were out on your feet. I had to drag you to the machine. He knows the rest, I guess."

Lafferty grinned.

"I don't know from nothin', Chief. It all sounds like a hay-smoker's dream to me. First of all, you and the gal pulled a fade-out—"

It all started to come back now. It was long ago and far away, but it started to come back. Jeff nodded.

"We were ghost-hunting. In this house. And we found von Torp in this laboratory—"

"Von Torp? Oh, yeah—the cuckoo? Well, what I'm trying to tell you is, when I came to the house for you the next morning you weren't here. Nobody was here. Nothing was here but a bunch of footprints.

"So I started snooping. I found those footprints led to a blank wall. I pushed and pulled, and—" Lafferty shrugged. "Well, I got here. Found this dumb-looking machine, and couldn't make any sense out of it. But I used the old conk for a change. Didn't monkey with the dials until I had a look around.

"I found von Torp's notebook, explaining how the thing worked. Found the short and repaired it. Set it going, and—looked like I was just in time, too! Found you folks in a helluva looking mudhole, you flat on your puss, the gal weeping. How come? Where were you? And why?"

Jeff said, "How long did it take you to do all this, Lafferty?"

Lafferty frowned.

"Let's see. Oh, ten . . . twelve hours, maybe. It was early this morning we came to the house. They're raising an awful clamor back in town. But how about it, Chief? Where were you? And how—I mean, those crazy-looking duds—"

Jeff looked at Beth helplessly. He might succeed in explaining everything to Lafferty. Lafferty was his assistant, and a smart youngster. He might understand.

But how could he ever give this fantastic story to the world? How explain to them that he and Beth had lived for weeks—for almost two months—in a world that had died a million years ago, and had come back after twelve hours' lapse of time?

It was better to say nothing. Except, maybe, some day to Lafferty. They had the machine. It was theirs to experiment with further.

Jeff said, "I'll explain later, kid. Right now I need a bath and a shave and some clean clothes. And so does Beth—I mean, Miss Anderson. And, Lafferty, when you go into town to get the clothes, get me a ring, will you?"

"Ring?" The assistant looked puzzled. "What kind of ring, Chief?"

"Wedding, you dope! That is—" Jeff turned to the girl, and the grin crept back to his lips. "That is, unless Beth's still planning to 'expose' a certain fake and fraud and phony 'ghost-buster'?"

Beth smiled, too, ruefully. She looked at her garb, and there wasn't enough of it to conceal her blush. "I think there's been enough 'exposing' around here for one day. And I like that ring idea, Snake-Killer."

"Snake-Killer?" said Lafferty. "Fake? Ring? Hey, what's going on around here, anyway?"

"I'm Snake-Killer," said Jeff complacently. And he scowled suddenly. "And maybe you'd better get going before I pretend you're a snake! Now, scram, kid!"

Lafferty left. And with his departure, the house was silent and quite, quite deserted—as a haunted house should be—safe for Snake-Killer and his mate.

It was, thought Snake-Killer, an ideal opportunity to celebrate by kissing the gal. But thoroughly. Snake-Killer's mate seemed to think so, too.