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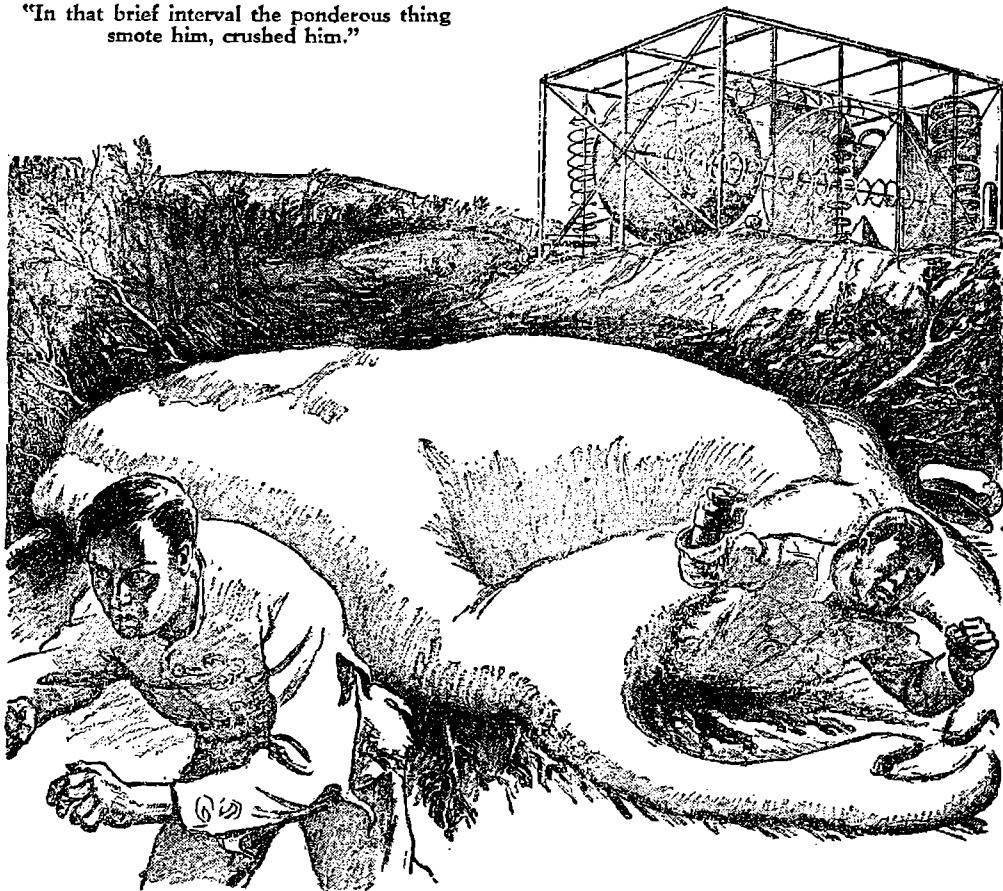
FARNSWORTH WRIGHT, Editor

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**WEIRD TALES ISSUED 1st OF EACH MONTH**

"In that brief interval the ponderous thing smote him, crushed him."



# Giant-Plasm

By DONALD WANDREI

*A strange story of an earthquake-spawned island in the Pacific,  
and the fate of five castaways at the hands of  
fearsome beings from another star*

## 1. The Seaquake

**T**ODAY was the eighth in the open dory. We doled out the last of our water and provisions this noon. The sun continues to flame across an absolutely frightful sky. It is useless to seek protection under the

tarp. The heat comes through, bounces off the bottom, and makes an oven between the canvas and the planks. The only thing to do is sit up. Then we can roast in what comfort there is from the breath of wind created by our slow progress.

There must be a breeze on the Pa-

cific, but God knows where. Certainly not here, for the ocean is a blinding blue mirror except for faint swells that are hardly noticeable.

Eight days gone, and only six of us left out of the eleven who started when the *Reva* sank. Three or four weeks more before we can reach the nearest land. We'll never make it. If there had been time to use the radio—but there wasn't. And we're far off the regular cargo lanes. Maybe Captain Bligh *did* steer an open boat for over forty days and reach shore safely after the mutiny on the *Bounty*, but I'm damned if I can see how.

Santos has started croaking about land again. I'm glad his voice is nearly gone. The first few days he hollered every time he saw a cloud, or thought he saw something. He drove us all frantic. There does seem to be some sort of blob on the horizon. It's straight against the setting sun. But we all know there's no land within five or six hundred miles yet. It's probably a cloud or just an illusion. Or maybe a ship. If it's a ship it'll pass on in the night without seeing us, so we may as well forget it.

The only way to forget all this hell is to keep on writing, Diary. You're getting to be my best friend, a good substitute for the travel articles I was going to do at the end of this ill-fated trip. I wish you could talk back to me instead of this bunch of scum. Pablo Santos, a stoker, is short, thick, and oily, with the long arms of an ape. The *Reva*'s second mate, Sam Glenk, is a fat lunkhead. Anybody with a name like that would be. Pete Lapous, the cook, is a scrawny, dour duck who looks as if he had a nest of mice in his tummy. He'd likely pitch me overboard if he could read.

Dave Anderson, one of the two pas-

sengers surviving besides myself, has a big body and a small head. He doesn't talk much. The other passenger saved when that tramp steamer nose-dived is a woman who goes by the name of Wanda Hall.

I don't know what her real name is but I'm sure that isn't. She looks a little like an adventuress, talks a little like a trumper, and acts as if she'd been in tight spots before. I can't quite make her out. I rather like her, though you couldn't possibly call her a knock-out for beauty right now. At that she's easier on the eyes than the rest of these lugs. She has black hair that glistens and a dark complexion that makes her look Spanish, but I know she comes from the States.

**I**t's a queer business, the way the *Reva* went down. We've been talking about it ever since. We haven't yet been able to figure it out. All I remember is being slammed out of my bunk in the middle of the night. I had the devil's own job getting to the deck. It was like bouncing around in a plane that went through loops, side-rolls, and tail-spins.

The sudden lurches threw me half a dozen times, but I managed to stagger out. Somewhere along the way I took the Hall dame in tow. I don't remember where; anyway we reached the starboard rail just as the first boat was launched. Right then the *Reva* stuck her nose down, and slid out of sight, and that was the end of her, along with the rest of the passengers and crew.

The sea boiled and stewed in huge bulges of waves. I've never seen anything like it before. I didn't notice any wind, and yet by the dim light of the waning crescent moon the Pacific looked as if somebody down below had lighted a whopping big fire and the

whole ocean was beginning to boil. But the water didn't feel any too warm when I got dunked. I came up beside the Hall woman, and somebody hauled both of us into the dory after we yelled awhile.

So that's all I'll ever know about it, except the stink—phooey, what a stink! Enormous bubbles kept floating up to the surface and going *plop!* Then we'd get a whiff of what smelled like a mixture of sulfur fumes and rotten eggs.

I suppose Glenk's guess is as good as anybody's. He thinks a submarine explosion of some sort created a tidal wave or a series of conflicting tidal waves that caught the *Reva* in the heart of the disturbance. The first push was the one that tossed me out of my bunk. Then the others rocked the ship, stood her on end so that the cargo shifted, and started her down. Probably the boilers blew at that stage and finished her.

The dory bobbed for an hour on walls and avalanches and whirlpools of crazy water, the air filled with the stench of gaseous fumes, and down below, far down, the glow of murky fires. We kept bumping into things. Dead sharks, dead tuna, dead tarpon, thousands of dead fish floated up to the surface. They helped out on the food stores the first couple of days.

Santos is still mumbling about land. The sun will pop out of sight in a minute or two, suddenly, the way it always does in these latitudes. I felt a thrill now when I took another look in the direction that Santos was jabbering toward, because I almost believe there is land ahead. But that's impossible unless the marine earthquake threw up an island. It can't be a ship, for there isn't any smoke.

Santos and Dave Anderson have been handling the oars this shift. San-

tos continues to poke his head around to look at his imaginary island.

"Hey, you!" He just squawked at me. "Why don't you look? It's land, land! We're saved!"

It got under my skin. I stopped writing. "Why should I look? I'll believe it's land when we reach it. Anyways, the sun's going down. In the morning we'll probably find it was only a cloud. Then it'll be my turn at the oars and you can spend all your time squinting for land."

As I started to go on with my notes, I had a premonition. I raised my head, attempted to get up and dodge. Santos, fever-mad, had yanked the oar out. I saw the blade smash toward my head. I saw Dave Anderson rise and lunge, his hands clawing to bring Santos down. I saw the cankers that the sun and thirst and exposure had raised on Santos's face. They made him look like a gargoyle, a leering ogre, in that wilderness of smooth waters, heat, torment, and loneliness.

I felt sorry for him. The sun vanished, stars rioted, and suffocating blackness swallowed me up when the oar bounced off my skull. I remember how utterly absurd it all seemed, Santos in a rage and trying to kill me merely because I didn't happen to agree with him that there was land ahead.

## 2. For the Benefit of Sharks

THE coolness of night surrounded me when I regained consciousness. The process took time, a half-hour, or an hour, I don't know how long. The blackness would grow soupy, and start swimming, and out of it would emerge the stars, the dory, the sound of oars dipping. My head felt wet. Somebody was holding it. I guessed that Wanda had washed the cut with salt

water. The cut hurt like fire. When I tried to sit up, a blasting headache and waves of pain washed me away again into that blackness of darkness.

"Easy. You took a nasty blow," I heard her murmur the last time I came out of fog. Her voice sounded sweet and husky, but that must have been the softening effect of night on the moonless, vast undulation of water. I knew well enough that her throat was as parched as mine.

The advice was good. I followed it. I didn't try to get up. I lay there staring at the stars in the sky, millions and millions of them, clusters and hordes and torrents flaming coldly out there in the far gulfs of space. For some reason, I didn't feel small or insignificant, the way I was supposed to be impressed according to all the stories I'd read. The dory was bobbing around on an ocean that seemed just as limitless as space, and the feeling I really got was one of friendliness toward the stars.

I raised my right arm to wave at the stars. My hand hit a soft substance. Wanda gasped, "What's the big idea trying to knock me out?"

"Sorry. I didn't mean to. I was just waving at the stars." That time I managed to sit up and stay up, though the stars went through some wild loops that would have brought cheers from an astronomer.

"Waving at the stars? You're still raving," I heard her mutter.

"No, I'm not," I insisted. She stopped rubbing her chin where I had unintentionally slapped her. From what I could see of her face, she didn't look any too convinced.

I changed the subject. "I'm all right now. Who pulled Santos off? Did Anderson manage to get him calmed down?"

She didn't answer.

"What's the matter?"

She shuddered. I could feel her shake for a brief second, but when she spoke, her voice sounded perfectly normal. "Santos isn't with us any more. He and Dave Anderson went overboard."

That gave me a jolt. "How did it happen?"

"After Santos crowned you with the oar, Dave jumped up and grabbed him. It threw them both off balance. When they pitched overboard the boat rocked so badly I thought we'd all go in. Glenk headed the dory around, but only Anderson came up. They were pulling him back when I thought I saw Santos rise, but it must have been an illusion. He never did come up."

"People don't simply go down once—sharks!" I blurted.

She didn't say anything.

Suddenly I was tired, bitter. "What a rotten excuse for dying! We're going to die anyway, toasted black by the sun, or tortured by sight of water we can't drink, or famished for food we haven't got. But for a man to feed the sharks just because somebody else disagreed with him about land being in sight—it sounds as insane as the idiotic things that wars are fought over."

"It wasn't your fault. We're all on the ragged edge. Santos simply went berserk. He thought there was land ahead, he wanted to be saved, and he couldn't bear the thought of anyone to the contrary."

"Is land in sight?"

"We don't know. Pete says there isn't even a speck of land for five hundred miles yet. Easter Island is closest, whatever that is. I never heard of it before."

"Easter Island?" The name puzzled me—then I remembered. "That's an island several square miles in area

lying a couple of thousand miles west-northwest of Chile. It has some volcanic peaks and a lot of big stone images. We'll never make it."

"Glenk claims that maybe we won't need to. He says islands have been known to appear and disappear in the South Pacific and elsewhere. He says that the same submarine earthquake that sank the *Reva* might have tossed a mountain peak above the surface. Santos could have been right about sighting an island."

"Sure he could, and a lot of good it will do him now. Or us. A nice big peak fresh from the sea-bottom. Covered with lovely grade A mud and slime. Some sea-weeds—try and eat them. Probably a few puddles of salt water—have a drink." I might have gone on with the sarcasm but a voice bellowed, "Shut up, you, or take the oars!"

Curious, how you get used to things so that they don't register even when they're only a few feet away. Glenk and Pete had been rowing while we talked.

So there were only five of us left—one less mouth to feed, if there had been anything to feed it. Four men and a girl—a tough enough combination in an open boat, but at least we were bound by a common ordeal. I wasn't sure that I wanted us to land. Of course, I didn't have anything but a casual interest for Wanda's safety, but I'd expect anything from those other three cutthroats. I saw only trouble ahead whether dawn broke upon a deserted ocean or upon a forgotten or newly risen island.

### 3. *Perilous Land*

A shout wakened me before the sun came up. My eyes felt coated with sand.

I heard excited voices. Truth to tell, I hadn't slept much or soundly. I kept dozing, on and off, becoming drowsily aware of Wanda or the canopy of brilliant stars, then dropping back into nausea and a nightmare-ridden half-sleep. I don't dream much as a rule, but the ones I had that night would have scared hell out of a brass monkey.

I pushed myself up. I wondered how a man could live with so many aches—swollen tongue, long hunger, sun-baked skin, sun-blinded eyes, the steel-hard ribs and planks of the dory, and a splitting headache. Then I saw Wanda again, and it irked me to think that she could take it better than I. Maybe she couldn't, but she didn't let it show.

There was a pale immensity of dawn from the tinge of rose above the eastern horizon to the fleeing wall of night toward the west. The sea remained almost glassily calm. Just a low gurgle of water, and the creak and dip of oars, told me that we moved. It was already sultry, with no breeze. Another frantic day crawled on.

I couldn't believe it when I saw the shadowy hump of land ahead. I stroked my sore eyes, but that only made them feel worse. They smarted like acid burns. When I looked again, I saw the island still there, a dark mass coming into sharper focus as the sun rose.

The jabber of voices brought me really awake. Sam Glenk was croaking, "Look! Look! I told you so! I said the same quake might toss an island up! It did; there it is!"

Pete Lapous asked, "How'd it grow trees overnight?"

"Shut up, you half-baked scum of a cook. Some earthquake threw that land up. What difference does it make

if it came up last week or last century? It's here——"

"Oh, stop your everlasting gab!" Wanda said tartly. "You make me sicker than I am. This man is injured. He——"

"Who, that guy? He's only another passenger and a rotten one at that," Glenk rumbled. "Any time he could help, he sits and scribbles in that damn notebook. Who's going to read it? What use is it? You can't eat it. You know what's in it. The sap-lugging a notebook of all things out of his cabin——"

"What of it? He instinctively got what meant most to him when the ship went down. You're a bully and a would-be Napoleon, so you grabbed a gun and a pocketful of bullets. Pete is a cook. He swept up as much food as he could. If it wasn't for that, we wouldn't be here now. As for me, I brought my handbag and a bunch of press clippings. Now go ahead and land; that's what *you* are supposed to be good for."

I gave a silent cheer. Dave Anderson looked off across the waters. The other two men glowered at Wanda and me, then went ahead beaching the dory. I thought then that Wanda looked like an angel, but there was too much excitement the next few hours for further thought along those lines.

**A**N HOUR after sunrise, we ran ashore on a sandy ledge. The island is of volcanic origin, rising straight out of the sea, with only a few short stretches of beach. In most places the cliffs drop precipitously. It advances by a series of terraces and slopes toward a central peak or crater. I wouldn't be surprised if it is part of a chain of mountains that extends under the sea.

This island where no island should be, is a queer one. It is the queerest I ever saw. It is a ghost island. I got a spooky feeling when I first saw it by daylight, and the feeling grew after we landed and explored it a little.

It is a dark island, a black island, with rocks and hard, clayey silt underfoot. There is a good deal of grass, fairly thick underbrush, and a sprinkling of young trees. They include some coconuts, mangoes, bananas, wild raspberries, oranges—a medley of stuff from seeds blown by the wind or washed ashore from the refuse of distant steamers, I suppose. There are also a couple of small, barely adequate springs. We could subsist here for a few weeks.

This island can't have been here for more than a few years, five or ten at most, to judge by the vegetation. And yet——

Dead trees cover it, the trunks of trees that grew God alone knows how long ago. Beyond all doubt, this island existed at some past time, perhaps a couple of hundred years ago, perhaps much farther back in the dawn of time. I remember reading once about an old Dutch navigator who claimed to have seen a considerable stretch of land a thousand miles off the coast of Chile back in the Seventeenth or Eighteenth Century. Maybe this is part of that lost land, maybe it isn't.

An earthquake sent it down, an earthquake brought it back. And here the old stumps stand, naked, stripped of leaves and bark, now dried out and rotting, amid the new growths. Those old trunks loom like dead giants, fifty feet high and more. It is impossible to describe the sinister effect that they have, rising in such striking but desolate array far above even the tallest of the young vegetation.

It is a silent island, save for the sea washing against the cliffs. There are a few gulls that have sought it out, but no other birds, no insects, no animals whatsoever. And there are mysteries upon it—like the mystery of the great stone statue.

The statue faces west, its back to the sea. It stands a hundred yards beyond the inlet where we landed.

The inlet is under the handle of the cup. By this I mean that the whole island is roughly two miles long and a mile wide, shaped very much like a cup lying sidewise. A lagoon at one end, surrounded by a curving rim of land, is similar to the handle of the cup. Under the handle, where it joins the cup or main body of the island, is the ledge where we landed. Beyond that ledge, left toward the mainland, towers the colossal fragment of statuary. We noticed it when we first landed, but we didn't go back to examine it closely until after we had scouted for food and water.

The part of the statue still erect is at least forty feet tall. Originally it must have stood a hundred feet high. The head and upper torso toppled during one of those older earthquakes, leaving the legs and trunk. The shattered fragments that lie partly buried have weathered. The whole must have been a weird colossus. I can not imagine what it is supposed to represent. It bears some human resemblance, but looks more like a grotesque, immense suit of armor or encasement for a faceless robot. When first erected hundreds or thousands of years ago, it must have dominated all else upon the island, and even now it overshadows the vestiges of the ancient forest.

"It's an ugly thing! Let's leave it alone," Wanda exclaimed as we looked at the fallen monarch.

"Sure, we'll find out what else is on the island," Glenk rumbled. "We got to climb the peak and name it and take possession anyway."

Dave Anderson, who had a curiously small voice for so big a frame, objected mildly. "That's easy for you to say. What about the rest of us who don't have shoes? We aren't fit for tramping around."

It was true. I realized again how strangely dressed a group we were—Dave Anderson and I barefoot, in the pajamas we wore when tumbled out of our bunks. Pete Lapous looked ridiculous in a suit of atrocious flannel underwear. Wanda, awake reading at the time of the disaster, came out with a scarlet blouse, white slacks, and scarlet sandals. She flaunted a good figure. Only Sam Glenk, who had been strolling idly around the deck, was fully dressed.

Glenk grinned. "Stay here then. Wanda and I'll name the island."

"The name is Miss Hall," she retorted. "Go climb a peak yourself. I'll loaf around with the others."

"Let's all go," I suggested. "Shoes or no shoes, I'm puzzled, though I don't care a hoot about claiming the island. I'd like to know if it has any more mysteries like the dead forest and this mammoth of a statue. We could make the climb in easy stages."

**I**N THE end we all went. Glenk swaggered ahead, but Wanda dropped back with us who walked barefoot. Glenk didn't like that, and finally lagged until we caught up with him. He gave me a mean scowl, since Wanda happened to be strolling alongside me at that moment.

I asked the second mate, "How long do you expect to stop here?"

"A day or two. Long enough for

the bunch of you to get in better shape."

"Then what?"

"What do *you* think? We can't stay here and rot. There ain't any too much ground water. Maybe we'll have to hang around for a week before we can stock enough water for the next lap. All the fruit on the island wouldn't last us a month. Our best bet is to collect all the stuff we can and get away as soon as possible. We could make Easter Island in a fortnight with good weather."

Wanda turned up her nose. "I'd rather stay here than spend two more weeks in an open boat. One taste of hell was plenty."

"Well, we can't just go off and leave *you*!" I exclaimed.

Glenk nodded. "You're right about that. And I'm damned if we'll squat here waiting for *you* to make up your mind."

Wanda said obstinately, "Just the same I'll take my chances on the island while you men get to civilization and send help back. Maybe five people couldn't last long, but there's certainly enough food for one person to stay alive a month or two."

The argument halted because we needed our breath to climb a short but steep hill.

At the top, we found something else to think about.

The center of the island was a circular plateau about a quarter of a mile in diameter. The usual young growths and stark trunks of the ancient forest covered parts of it. We now had a good view of the peak, or rather, what we had assumed to be the cone of an extinct volcano. At this close range it suddenly became another thing entirely: the ruins of a great building or temple of some sort, ill defined because buried under a gray-white mound. Scattered

off to one side were a number of smaller mounds.

We straggled toward our find. I knew without a word being said that Glenk's greedy soul was driven by visions of loot—I could see the dream of golden sacrificial goblets firing his hot eyes. The island had once been inhabited. The race had reached a stage of culture that made them build statues and structures. Any treasure that they owned in the way of gold, precious metals, gems, or art objects would center around their place of worship or their burial sites, as with most of the earlier civilizations. I knew that such hopes drove Glenk on so strongly that he outdistanced the rest of us.

A restless feeling began to grow on me. It made me uneasy. I didn't know why. The peculiar silence of the island's interior, with the sound of the sea muted by distance, may have had something to do with my worry. The blow on my head plus the let-down after eight days of exposure probably contributed to my state of mind. But most of all, I think it was really the sight of that strange, gray-white mound covering the outlines of the building underneath. I was wondering why a gray-white deposit happened to coat a particular building while it lay sunk under the sea, and why sediment didn't distribute itself evenly over the whole island. It is strange stuff indeed that picks out its own site to fall on.

#### 4. *Shining Armor*

GLENK was prowling around with a glum expression by the time we caught up with him at the gray-white mound. Seen close by, it lost some of the definite outlines of a building that it had suggested from a distance. Gone was the second mate's dream of wealth,

for not the slightest trace of an opening showed, if a temple lay buried beneath the stuff.

Whatever it was, it possessed a most extraordinary shape. It somewhat resembled a vast boulder, a solid block about sixty feet long, forty wide, and thirty high, roughly rectangular. There were several indentations that suggested doors and windows. On one side a ledge projected much like a porch or altar. The resemblance to a building was uncanny. So was the gray-white stuff, which presented something new in my experience.

Glenk kicked it viciously, in disgust I suppose at not finding gold. Nothing happened. And that scared me, because something *should* have happened.

If you kick a rock, you hear an audible grate or a dull, stony sound. Kick metal and you get a ring or a clang. Kick rubber and it gives to the pressure. But none of these results came about. The only idea I could think of was that it seemed as if he had kicked steel-hard dough, whatever that means.

I felt the wall. It startled me to find it cold and *dry* though sunshine flooded it. Cold and clammy would have been natural—a cold surface sweats to hot air. Or hot and dry would have been all right. But cold and dry under a tropic sun—

“What’s the matter?” Glenk asked.

“This stuff—what is it? There’s something all wrong about it.”

“Bosh. You’re seeing things. It’s just a big hunk of sunbaked clay or mud.”

“It’s hard, tough, and cold, yet I think it would give if we hit it with enough strength,” I insisted. “Have you ever seen anything like it before?”

Glenk scoffed. “There has to be a first time for anything you see that’s queer. Otherwise it wouldn’t be queer.”

“It’s more than that. Why does the stuff cling here? It’s almost as if a—skin—had developed around a building—”

“Haw—haw—haw!” His booming laughter rolled back at me. I didn’t see anything funny, not with that immense mass of strange, pallid stuff in front of me. But Glenk laughed so hard that he gasped, and then laughed some more, while I hoped he choked.

His voice grated on my ears the same way that the touch of the mass had grated on my nerves. It didn’t feel right, because it didn’t feel like anything familiar, and again a curious thought sprang into my mind. It felt like a dry, frozen jellyfish.

I walked all around the block. When I got back to the starting-point, I was more convinced than ever that a temple *did* lie underneath the gray-white deposit.

*But what was the gray-white deposit?*

I picked up a flat stone with a sharp edge, intending to see if I could chip away part of the surface. Then I saw something that made my hair bristle. I know my eyes bulged. I heard the blood pound like monstrous trip-hammers at my temples.

“Look—look!” I gulped. I wouldn’t have recognized my voice as my own. Standing there in broad daylight, I was almost petrified with fear. I admit it: But so were the others. For the impression of the toe of a shoe had formed where Glenk had kicked the surface a few minutes ago. None of us had seen it form. But there it was. And it most certainly had *not* been there when or immediately after Glenk kicked the stuff.

We must have stood for five minutes in dead silence, our eyes absolutely hypnotized by that indentation. I stared until I began seeing spots all

over. I don't know whether I saw the hole close up or not, my eyes ached so from the intensity of staring. But at the end of five minutes, not a trace of the hole remained.

Wanda let out a deep sigh. I turned. I thought she was going to faint. She had the whitest face I've ever seen. I dropped the rock I was still foolishly holding and sprang over to help her. That broke the spell. The others swarmed around us.

Wanda said, "Thanks, I'm all right. It's been such a strain all these days—my eyes were playing tricks"—she snickered a little hysterically—"why, would you believe it, I actually thought I saw that wall move!" She stared up at us with pleading eyes.

"Just an optical illusion," I stated as calmly as I could. "Shadows are apt to play tricks."

"Sure, I saw it too," the thick-headed Glenk muttered.

"That's how group errors get started. That's the way rumors about bleeding images and angel hosts over battlefields are born," I tossed off lightly.

But it all went for naught, because Pete Lapous turned at that moment and let out a sort of squawk or bleat. We all jumped.

Where Glenk had kicked the mass, and where the impression of a toe had subsequently developed, there was now a projecting knob, shaped like the tip of a shoe.

PETE LAPOUS, grotesque and ridiculous in his long flannels, went legging off as hard as he could, but stopped after a dozen yards when he found nothing at his heels. We yelled at him, got him quieted down. And when we turned our attention on the gray-white surface again, the knob, like

the hole before it, was gone. Only the smooth wall met our gaze.

"Take me away from here—back to the shore," Wanda begged.

I felt a good deal better myself as she hooked her arm in mine. The good old protective instinct did me a favor then, by exactly counterbalancing the fear that had started growing inside of me.

And I considered it a healthy fear, since it put me on guard against an unknown foe.

It upset me to find myself thinking of that gray-white mound as a living enemy. My thoughts were a crazy jumble. I remembered stories I'd read about protoplasm, about fungoid growths, about scaly formations on wrecks, and even about the rust that oxidation produces on iron. I kept seeing the crust of a pie, and every now and then I had an impulse to laugh. If we took the gray-white crust off, what would we find—a temple, or a heap of dried apples? Out of such giddy visions, my perspective slipped back into focus.

"You're very silent," Wanda complained.

"I was thinking that you never can guess what lies under a shell. A pea or a walnut or an egg—or even gunpowder."

She looked puzzled. "That doesn't make sense."

"What does? We get shipwrecked in fair weather in deep water hundreds of miles from land. We can't radio for help. We save ourselves when we should have drowned. We live for eight days in an open dory with raw fish and not enough water and reach an island that isn't on the maps. Nightmare Island—that's what Glenk should have named it if he hadn't forgotten. Or Phœnix Island—down she goes and

up she comes. Or Chance Island—you never know what comes next."

I was glad to see her smile. "How about Magic Island? Now you see something, now you don't."

An answer of some sort died on my lips, for I *did* see something then and there. My stride slackened for a couple of steps, before I got hold of myself.

Wanda felt the lag, asked, "Did you stub your toe?"

"Not enough to matter," I lied.

I heard the pat and scuffle of the feet that followed us, bare soles, and Glenk's shoes. I didn't hear them falter. The others missed what I saw.

"Magic Island—not a bad name. Now you see something, now you don't," I repeated Wanda's words.

She was quick to suspect. "The mounds we're passing — what did I overlook?"

"Nothing. Some mounds cover bones, and some don't."

She dropped the subject. The smaller mounds lying away from the central block were at least twenty feet long. I've heard of Indian burial mounds much larger than those in the States. But it wasn't a bone that caught my eye.

We slid down the hills, threaded our way past the ancient, dead trunks, skirted or plunged through the tangle of green growths. By the time we reached the dory, I hadn't found a way to solve the query in my mind.

Dave Anderson solved it for me. He remarked in his small, quiet voice, "If we're going to stay here overnight, we ought to collect food and firewood. There might be shellfish along the shore."

The second mate growled, "That's what I said when we landed here. You and Lapous scout along the shore.

Wanda can watch the dory. I'll hunt for fruit, food, and whatnot. *You*," he added to me as an afterthought, "can get the makings of a fire."

By tacit understanding, we avoided reference to what we had seen at the gray-white mound. Lapous started poking along the shore northward. Dave Anderson went off in the opposite direction. I didn't think either of them would have much luck, because of the steep cliffs surrounding most of the island. Still, there were a few stretches of beach, and it might be possible to clamber down the bluffs in a couple of places.

Glenk was watching both me and Wanda. I asked her if she felt better, and when she said yes, I struck inland. I looked back once. I didn't trust that Glenk mutt. But he had left Wanda and was pressing into the tangle of vegetation, presumably to locate more nut and fruit trees.

As soon as he was out of sight, I circled around to head off Dave Anderson. I picked him because he talked less than anybody else, and I figured he would have sense enough to keep his mouth shut.

He was climbing up along the top of a drop-off when I caught sight of him. I beckoned with my hand. He plodded over, looking neither surprised nor curious, as though it was all part of the day's work.

"Come along with me," I said. "I made a find that's worth investigating. It'll take two to do the job."

He didn't ask questions. He simply followed in my tracks. I began to wonder if he talked so little because he had nothing to say, and was just plain stupid, or whether he knew more than he indicated. Whatever the reason, I never met a more phlegmatic, non-communicative man.

I HEADED for the mounds around the big rectangle. There were three of the mounds about twenty feet long, and another that was several hundred feet over all, much larger than the gray-white rectangle. The mounds had irregular shapes. Grass covered them. I suppose that the rest of our party considered them so many hills or slopes without further significance. They hadn't seen what I saw.

I led Anderson around one of the small mounds. In back of it, unnoticeable from the path we had followed a while ago except in one spot where the glint of sunlight betrayed it to my eyes, I showed him a chunk of shining, milky metal. It extended into the mound.

We dropped to our knees and looked at the metal. I had expected it to be silver, but it wasn't. It had a thin, bluish tinge, resembled milk glass, and glistened with virginal brilliance. Dave Anderson fingered it without a trace of emotion. For some obscure reason, his placid tolerance nettled me. Excitement was swelling inside of me. I couldn't identify the metal that looked like glass any more than I could identify the gray-white structure a few hundred yards away.

"Get a piece of stone, anything to scoop the surface dirt off. Let's see what's underneath," I told him, and hunted for a sharp-edged rock to use.

There was, we discovered, approximately two inches of clayey silt and sediment covering the mound. Grass bound it together and prevented the rains from washing it away. It had evidently settled on the object during the centuries it lay submerged under the sea. In some places, of course, the deposit was much thicker. Perhaps the caking had been a good deal heavier when the island rose again, but grass

seeds had taken root and spread before rains could remove all the encrustation.

At the end of a half hour of hard work that made us sweat aplenty, we had exposed many parts of one mound, and tapped the other two sufficiently to learn that they duplicated the contents of the first.

That first mound concealed a colossal, crumpled mass of shining armor. It had never been designed for a human form. We guessed that in its original shape it stood twenty or twenty-five feet in height, with a cylindrical body, a turret top, no arms, but three conical lower limbs or appendages that ended in sharp points without trace of a foot.

The body cylinder had been smashed. Inside lay the accumulated sediment of centuries. God knows what once walked around in that gigantic suit of armor. I couldn't imagine what it looked like, whatever it was, and wherever it came from. I realized that it didn't originate on earth. Neither Dave Anderson nor I could make the slightest scratch on that stainless, eternal metal.

### 5. Strange Death

WHILE we worked, I had an eery sensation of being watched. Several times I looked around, but saw nothing. I half expected the second mate to waddle along, but no one showed up. Finally I hooked my uneasiness to the presence of the gray-white mass off to one side and let it go at that.

"What giants they must have been that wore these suits!" I exclaimed after we had tested the third mound.

Anderson merely twitched his shoulders in a shrug.

I suggested, "Let's try the big one now. Maybe we'll find something to

shed a little more light, though I don't see what. I'm baffled already. The remains that turn up only seem to add new mysteries. How did this metal stuff get here? Who made it? What was inside? Where did it come from?"

"Can't say," said my all but silent partner.

We moved over to the main hill, and encircled it to get a better idea of our task. Like the gray-white mass and the metallic formations of armor, the large hill also had an odd shape. It resembled a tear-drop, broad at one end with a beautifully curved nose, so to speak, and a more gradually tapered point at the other end. As in the case of the three smaller mounds, it was covered with grass.

One side contained an irregularity, a bulge, a dozen feet out and a dozen high. We tried gouging the grass and clods of soil off. It took us a long time to penetrate a few feet into the bulge. So far as results indicated, we could tunnel through the whole hill, given opportunity enough, without finding anything.

I abandoned that task and asked Anderson, "How about one more try higher up or farther along?"

"Sure."

He scrambled to his feet, wiped some of the dirt off his hands, and followed me away from the bulge. I picked a spot at random—and a few inches in struck the same milky, glistening metal which composed the armor.

We climbed on top of the bulge—and about two inches down struck the metal again.

Dismay and sick disappointment took possession of me then. I dropped the rock I had used for digging. There never was a more heartfelt curse of defeat than the one I uttered.

"What's wrong?" my companion asked in his slow, soft voice.

"Nothing—nothing at all. Just that we'll have to give this up. It's too big for us to tackle alone."

"Sure," said Dave Anderson, and we started back. He ambled toward the sea, obediently going ahead with his previous instructions to hunt seafood.

I flung a last malevolent glance at the gray-white rectangle, where it bulked ominously against the wester-ing sun. On my way down, I loitered, selecting such firewood as was suitable. It didn't matter now if the rest of the party investigated the mounds. We'd only be here another day or two. I was bitter with disappointment, tantalized by a riddle none of us could solve or would have any chance to solve.

I knew in my heart what lay under the great hill. It concealed a half-buried ship, or ark, or cruiser of some sort. It was the vessel the giants came in. Maybe it had wrecked in landing. I don't know. Maybe the bulge was the open door to its interior. Maybe the bulge is a gap that burst open in landing and spilled the occupants out where they also smashed on the ground rocks. I don't know that either.

What I do know, and hate to know, is that while this island lay on the sea bottom, sediment drifted in through the opening and filled the interior at least to the height of the rent. Without proper tools, it would take us all working together a week to clear out even a small part of the silt. It would take a month to clear the whole inside even if we had spades and shovels.

There wasn't the ghost of a chance for me to find out the secret of the hill. I believed that it contained the wreck of a cruiser, a space-ship. I believed that its interior would disclose

fantastic machinery, engines, equipment, foodstuffs maybe, perhaps maps and plans and documents, records of an amazing cosmic voyage—I don't know what all. My imagination was reeling. The thing lay at my fingertips—and I couldn't get at it. The vessel—the queer armor — the gray-white stuff, they all linked up somehow.

I was beginning to get a picture, the picture of a thriving community here at some time in the past, a branch of the Polynesians. I saw a meteor from the skies plunge into their midst. But this meteor was a dazzling silvery streak that smote the ground and burst and spewed out a trio of dead or dying giants from the wrecked starplane. Maybe it spewed other things, too, such as a test-tube full of—what? Maybe the natives had a temple, and maybe they built a temple after the cruiser piled up. And maybe the test-tubeful spilled out and took over the temple.

That sequence would explain the huge, alien statue that stands by the lagoon and faces the rectangle on top of the isle. I could imagine the superstitious natives worshipping the intruder from the skies, and revering it as a deity, the statue erected in the image of the remembered dying giants in armor—until the day of that older earthquake which plunged the whole island to the sea bottom.

Right there my thoughts became a hopeless jumble again, because of the gray-white growth upon the temple. I had been nursing the idea that it was alive in a dim, rudimentary way. The manner in which the impression of a shoe-tip had formed a long while after Glenk kicked the wall, and how the stuff had still later thrust out to form a knob like a shoe-tip, proved in my mind that it had about the lowly instincts of a worm. I regarded it as an

overgrown blob with just a glimmer of life far back in the scale of evolution.

But if it grew on the temple when the pilgrims from afar landed—how could it have survived those centuries under the sea? And if it developed down on the sea beds, a product of earth's deep marine life, how could it have gone on living and growing when the island sprang above the waves again? How could it live in air one moment and go on living in the sea the next? Was it alive at all, for that matter, and if so, what did it live on? Or was it a vegetable, fungus growth rooted to the soil, a hybrid midway between land life and sea life, so primitive in its nature that it could exist equally well under both conditions?

My brain was looping by the time I got back to the dory. My ideas turned wilder and wilder. I found great vistas opening up to me that I'd never thought much about before.

In my thirty odd years, I had knocked around a good deal. I had done my share of miscellaneous reading. I had seen queer sights, and had met plenty of tramps no better and no worse than the ones I was marooned with. But we were all up against something new. Right then I'd have traded the kit and kaboodle of my companions for an hour's talk with a professor who had the imagination of H. G. Wells, the brain of Einstein, and talked words I could understand with the assurance of Roosevelt.

THE sun had slid far down when I reached the dory. I dumped my load of wood. Nobody paid attention to my soiled hands and tattered pajamas. I suppose we were all worn out from the ordeal and our day-long labors on the island, preoccupied with our own special thoughts. We had a

silent dinner on some shellfish that Lapous brought back, along with bananas, coconuts, and oranges that the second mate produced.

I wanted to talk to Wanda afterward, but couldn't think of anything to say. The discoveries that Anderson and I had made dominated my thoughts. Dave and I hadn't tried to cover up the objects we exposed. Wanda, Sam Glenk, and Pete might stumble on those same relics if we held the island for several days. Then we could talk, but until then I saw no point in pouring a stream of extra worries into Wanda's pretty head.

We turned the dory over at sunset as shelter for her.

The rest of us slept under the stars.

I watched Dave Anderson lower his big frame and spread out. I wondered what went on in his brain. At no time since returning to our makeshift camp had he given an inkling of unusual occurrences, or of being troubled.

I rolled over on my back and stared up at the stars. They didn't look so friendly as the night before. They blazed infinitely afar with riddles and mysteries beyond them. I fancied other starplanes plummeting those gulfs upon tremendous voyages that would dwarf all the Odysseys and explorations of mankind. I speculated on the possibility of earthmen one day launching rockets to the moon, or landing on the planets, or hurling starships into the depths of space.

A dream of giddy swoops and plunges through infinity beset me. I found myself on a teeter-totter. A roller-coaster miles high shot me at bullet speed up to its crest, then flung me into sheer, vertical drops.

I wakened suddenly. It was very dark, and I had the feeling that it was very late at night.

The island vibrated, trembled with a rumble like thunder.

"Get up! Earthquake!" a voice belied through the blackness.

I scrambled to my feet. Shadowy forms materialized around me. I swayed, confused, and the island shook again. I was vaguely conscious of the calm sea, the lapping slur of waves against the cliffs. It couldn't be an earth tremor, and yet I distinctly felt the ground sway.

A scream split the air in the distance. I couldn't tell what direction it came from. It sounded too shrill to be human. It screeched again, continuously, higher and louder.

A grotesque figure in flannels plunged by me.

"Pete! Pete Lapous! We can't do anything in this blackness! Somebody's got to stay by Wanda!" I yelled.

His teeth chattered. "What the hell, what the hell, I can't let him get killed, I got to help. I'm scared to death, I tell you, but I got to help!"

It was a pathetic and at the same time a brave person that pattered away from me. I sprang after him, grabbed him by the arm.

"Who is it? Who's missing? Quiet, all of you! Keep your heads!" roared Glenk.

We babbled in chorus—all except Dave Anderson.

"It's Anderson hollering. Shut up and try to get his direction!" the second mate boomed command.

The scream broke off abruptly, completely. The isle stopped vibrating. We listened hard in the dark, straining our ears, but not another sound came. I grew aware of Wanda's tense breathing beside me, caught a whiff of her hair.

I heard restless, uneasy movements around me, while the slow minutes

crawled by. We waited in vain for that terror-born scream to rise again, and I for one was glad to be spared another such agonized, frantic, wordless cry. Glenk blew on the almost dead embers, nursed the coals into a comforting flame. Thus we waited, our nerves raw, until the pale light of dawn glimmered above the horizon after what seemed interminable ages.

"The voice came from the peak of the island. You've got the only gun among us. Let's all strike for there first," I demanded of Glenk.

"Bunk!" snorted the second mate. "I'll bet an eye-tooth the yelling came from across the lagoon."

"I don't know where it came from. It just filled the air on all sides," Wanda contributed.

"No, no, up there, up there along the cliffs!" Pete insisted excitedly. He pointed toward the route that Anderson had taken hunting for shellfish the previous afternoon.

GLENK waved his hands. "This island covers two square miles. We'd need all day to cover it traveling in a group. We'll have to split up——"

"So that whatever got Anderson, meaning the gray-white stuff, can pick us off one at a time——" I began.

"Forget that nightmare of yours!" he shouted. "For God's sake, can't you think of anything else? Maybe he was just restless and went walking around. Maybe a tree fell on him. Maybe he fell off a cliff. Maybe we missed an animal that scared him. How do we know what happened till we find out? How can we find out unless we cover the ground as fast as possible? Maybe he's only knocked out. We've got to find him first before we do anything else. Now scatter, all of you. I'm going across the lagoon. Pete, follow

the route that Anderson went yesterday. Wanda can watch here same as before in case he turns up. And you go take a look at your damned bogey and if you don't like that, stick around the lagoon while I hunt up your pet brain-storm."

I was mad enough to have taken a punch at him but it was no time to fight among ourselves. It would have served no purpose for me to try to explain all that Dave and I had learned the day before. From the mulish temper Glenk was in, he wouldn't listen to reason. I suppressed my feelings and headed straight for the heart of the island.

Scared? The germ of panic dwelt in me. The silent bushes around me, the growing, ghostly light of dawn, the gaunt, forbidding boles of dead trees, and the half-knowledge, half-mystery of what lay ahead all preyed on my thoughts. But I was angry, too, which helped. Angry, because I suspected that Glenk had deliberately given me the dangerous assignment in the hope I wouldn't come back. That would leave him a clear field with Wanda, not counting Pete, who didn't count anyway.

My feet, already sore from previous activity, collected a few more scratches as I plodded inland and upward. I kept my eyes open. Two questions bothered me.

First, why was Glenk in such an evil humor? I figured a lot of reasons before the answer came, so simple that I cursed myself for a dimwit. Anderson had risen in the night and gone away without the rest of us realizing it. Therefore we all, including Sam Glenk, must have been sound asleep. Therefore Dave Anderson could have calmly proceeded to take the gun away from Glenk if he thought of it. Had he? I didn't believe so. True, Glenk hadn't

flourished the pistol, but then Dave Anderson, if he possessed it, would certainly have fired in the face of danger. I kissed good-bye to a lost opportunity. I could be sure that there wouldn't be another chance to relieve the second mate of the gun.

This line of speculation brought up the second query. Why had Dave Anderson stolen away from us? The answer eluded me, since I knew very little about his character. I finally decided that he was as devoid of fear as is humanly possible. His big body had survived the shipwreck even better than Glenk's.

He woke in the night. Perhaps he had seen something at one of the mounds that escaped my attention. His reticent soul had decided to investigate it at his own leisure.

I felt a sense of guilt. I was reasonably sure that I had reconstructed the events accurately. But I couldn't get away from the fact that on my shoulders lay the responsibility. I had brought him along to share my find. Whatever the bent of his secretive personality, I had whetted it by admitting him to my knowledge. If only I hadn't—one man alone could not have uncovered those tantalizing objects—we might have left the isle in safety and little the wiser.

The voices died out behind me. The only one I wanted to hear didn't come at all. I supposed Wanda was puttering around the dory, or getting water from one of the inadequate springs.

Going up the last slope to the middle plateau, with the sun now flaming above the far rim of the sea, I imagined many weird prospects ahead. The sight of the gray-white oblong cheated my hopes and my fears. That peak, those mounds were the same.

I paused. The features of the land-

scape seemed as I remembered them, but with a wrong note somewhere.

The gray-white mass, the enormous hill, the mounds.

There were only two small mounds instead of three.

### 6. Red Carpet

I STARED incredulously. There was not a trace of the third mound, the one that Dave and I had examined first. I could scarce believe my eyes. Not even on this crazy island did a hill walk away and disappear overnight.

Advancing warily, I kept an eye on the gray-white rectangle. I didn't expect anything definite, but it wouldn't have surprised me much if the whole mass jumped at me. With every passing minute my inner turmoil increased and my nerves grew more edgy.

I made my way toward the site of the missing mound. When still at a distance, I caught the glint of sunlight on metal lying on the level ground. I hurried my pace then, in the hope that the metallic shards might offer a clue to Dave Anderson's fate and what had happened to the vanished hill.

They did. The ground, where the hill had stood, bore the powdery outline, immensely broadened and completely flattened, of the shining suit of armor. Some force of inconceivable power had erased the mound, leveled it, hammered it to ground level. I recalled the way the island had shaken in the night, the rumble of thunder like an earthquake—but no tremor in history caused a hill or a building to collapse to paper thinness. This was rather as if the mound had been caught between solid rock, which in fact lay a couple of feet down under the top soil, and the application of titanic pressure.

I suppose the scene registered in-

stantly on my brain. I couldn't have had time to reason it out in detail, because I found Dave Anderson at almost the same moment that I reached the remains of the mound. Behind it, or more accurately, at the point where we had noticed the fragment of protruding metal on the day preceding, there now lay a red carpet.

My skin crawled while I stared at that horrible splotch on the ground, vaguely human in shape, an inextricable mixture of blood, soil, flesh, giving off the unmistakable odor of human pulp. I couldn't bring myself to go close to the red smear. By a handful of yellow strands I made the identification—Anderson was the only one of us with such blond hair.

I turned toward the gray-white rectangular mass with hatred pounding through me, and blind horror. In no way did that huge block differ from its appearance the day before, yet I sensed it as a far more positive entity, a more dangerous and deadly menace. I backed away from it, watching for the slightest motion of the mass, but it stood there squat and ominous in the morning light, as rigid and lifeless as stone.

Well separated from it, I began hurrying back to the shore. I shouted once or twice to Pete Lapous, who ought to be nearer than anyone else, but after that saved my breath. What could possibly be gained by haste? I was reluctant to admit that I ran simply to put distance between me and that monstrous, pallid-hued, rectangular block. In spite of fear, I forced myself to set a slower pace.

I didn't find the others around the dory, not even Wanda. I trotted up the ridge of ground that enclosed the lagoon—and then forgot the horror on the peak. All my resentment against Sam Glenk flared up. I started racing

as fast and as silently as I could in the reckless hope of getting him before he saw me.

Why? It didn't stretch my imagination one iota to visualize the whole picture at first glance. Wanda, abandoned by the rest of us, had gone for a morning dip and swim in the lagoon. Glenk's course had taken him around to the far side of the lagoon. When he found no trace of Anderson, he must have noticed the girl, and decided to obtain a little of his malodorous brand of fun while the rest of us rambled over the island.

Wanda was raging, but she couldn't do much against brute power as that massive pig clumsily pawed her and tried to kiss her when she came out of the water.

I ALMOST made it. I would have made it if Wanda's eyes hadn't lighted when she saw me. Glenk was so deep in his own desires that he didn't have time for other thoughts. But her expression warned him, and he swung around to meet me charging in. With a sweep of his arm, he shook her off while she tried to hang on and hamper him. He didn't go for the gun, though I now saw its bulge in a pocket.

I landed one solid blow. I hit him with everything I had, right on the chin, and it wasn't enough. I might as well have smashed at a stone wall. It staggered him, but he took it, and wrapped those ape-like arms of his around me.

That, I thought, as the pressure began, was the end of all this mad adventure for me. Glenk squeezed with an iron grip, stuck his head down, and butted against my chin. I could hear Wanda clawing and beating him from behind, but he ignored her. My head tilted back, back, back, and wrenches

of pain stabbed my throat. The sky was darkening, reeling with giddy flashes. I listened for the sound of my own neck cracking.

I caught a blurred vision, wondered if I had already entered the realm of phantoms. And then the sharp *thunk*.

But I was miraculously relaxing, and Sam Glenk tottered, slumped like a pole-axed steer. I heaved a deep breath, on the verge of collapse myself, and managed to croak, "Thanks!"

"A pleasure, a pleasure, I want to do it again," crowed Pete Lapous. "I heard you yell, five, ten minutes ago. I come a-running. I see no one, try the lagoon. Hah! What a man! Yell a mile, hold on till I come. So then I grab the rock and *clunk* goes the skull. Ah, so you still wiggle, you great swine? I fix that. I break your skull good this time."

I really believe he would have finished Glenk if Wanda and I hadn't restrained him. Pete yanked the revolver out of the second mate's pocket, and danced away.

There was murder in Glenk's eyes as he came back to life. And paradoxically, his sullen fury seemed directed entirely toward Pete, because Pete had the revolver. If the gun had been lost, Glenk would still have dominated the group. He didn't need the weapon for that. But we needed it, if only to control him. The gun was his symbol of authority. And Pete had it. From then on, I could discount Glenk. Recapturing the weapon from Lapous would be his dominant purpose.

My breath returning, I panted, "We've got to leave the island. Today. Now."

"Can't make it. Not enough water for the trip yet," grunted the second mate.

"We'll have to chance it. I located

Anderson—what was left of him." I started recounting the story of my gruesome discovery. A shocked expression came over Wanda, a puzzled look dawned in Pete Lapous' eyes, and Sam Glenk's face mirrored utter skepticism. They couldn't or wouldn't believe. My extra knowledge proved a boomerang. In order to drive home the truth, I told what Dave Anderson and I had uncovered on our private exploration.

I wound up with, "That's why we've got to leave. It's too damned plain that the gray-white monster killed Anderson. I don't know how. I don't want to know. Dump whatever food and water there is into the dory. It's our only chance. Here we're doomed."

The second mate's eyes lighted. The dream of loot again, I thought. He saw the shining armor only as precious metal to be carted off. He turned around, with, "Before I make up my mind I'll have to go up there and see for myself."

"I shoot! I shoot!" the cook volubly promised.

"Shoot and be damned. Part of the story sounds okay, part of it doesn't. If there's anything on this island with a cash value, I'll be a son of a gun if I'll go off and leave the secret behind. Anderson got trapped by night, if he is dead. This is broad daylight. I can look out for myself."

He swaggered inland toward the peak of the island. Pete flourished the revolver. If he wanted to take a few potshots at Glenk, that was all right with me, but I didn't think he would.

He didn't.

#### 7. *The Super-Structure*

"FOLLOW me!" I told the cook and Wanda.

I raced for the dory an eighth of a

mile away, with them at my heels, and cursed Glenk. He was a brave man, a fool, and scum, all rolled up in a barrel of meat. I hated him, but it wasn't in me to push off and leave him to the deadly surprises of the island.

Lapous and I turned the dory over. Wanda pitched in to help. We slid it out far enough so that a good push would launch it.

I gave Wanda her orders. "You stay here, put what fruit and water there is aboard, then climb in yourself and wait. Keep an oar handy. Shove off if you see anything you wouldn't want to see."

I started running with Pete toward the heart of the island. She shouted some questions that didn't even register on me.

It was bad going for both of us, barefoot. The bushes ripped at our legs, the rocks bruised and cut our already sore soles. My headache resumed its throbbing from the blow that Santos had swung at me with an oar a couple of nights ago in the boat. Glenk's loving workout on my throat hadn't made me feel better. It was all a mad business—why the devil should I run my legs off to help that stupid ox? But I knew the answer to that one too. The rest of us owned not the ghost of a chance of reaching safety across five hundred miles of ocean without Glenk to pilot us and drive us by his tough will.

Where was Glenk? I estimated that he would reach the summit of the island at the same time that we did. He had the advantage of a five-minute start on us, which he would lose because he made his way through more or less new terrain.

It turned out much as I expected. When we emerged on the central plateau, we saw Glenk off to our right halfway toward the closest of the two

remaining small mounds. Beyond loomed the long hill, and on top of the island stood that solid block of gray-white stuff.

Nothing had changed on the scene, yet I went forward filled with nervous apprehensions. I looked in Glenk's direction, but actually from the corners of my eyes I kept my gaze on the huge oblong mass, the greatest enigma on the island. I was beginning to crystallize a theory out of the jumbled images that floated around under the surface of my imagination.

I said to Pete, "Stay away from Glenk. Then you won't need to worry about his diving for the gun. Watch the gray stuff—it's the real danger."

Glenk went to one of the spots where Anderson and I had dug into the mounds. He discovered the giant armor, excitedly tried to break off a chunk, and when his efforts failed, attempted to drag a whole section out of the hill. Not even his prodigious strength could do the feat.

He worked like a madman for several minutes. He must have believed the metal an alloy of silver or platinum, which it couldn't possibly have been. At the end he straightened up and scowled savagely at the buried, unyielding armor. Sweat streaked his face that had already sprouted a ten-day stubble of beard.

I called to him, "Now that you've seen for yourself, admit it's hopeless and let's shove off."

"Not till I get a hunk of this stuff. I'm gonna work on it all day if I have to."

"Go ahead. Anderson tried. Take a look at what happened to him. Then stay around as long as you like. It's your private funeral." I pointed to the flattened mound.

Glenk walked over to it. The sight

gave him a jolt. I could tell by the way he stared down at the red carpet, and jerked his head up for a hard appraisal of the gray-white oblong. His ruthless, fearless nature lost its moorings for once.

I think that the first fear he had known must have fleeted into his life—and out. Glenk's make-up rested on the sort of obstinacy which wouldn't let him admit that he had met his match.

He turned his back squarely on the great mass and strode to the shining armor with a jaunty step. "The hell with your bugaboos! There was an earthquake last night. It woke us all up. Anderson got caught. That's all. The hill smashed down. It finished him, and another quake might finish me. I'll take the chance."

"Listen, you damned idiot!" I shouted. "You're getting us all into trouble just because of your infernal pig-headedness. The stuff isn't worth a nickel a ton except as a freak! You can't—"

"Freaks are worth cold cash. Shut up with that 'I can't' business."

"It's sure death to stay on the island. We can't wait till doomsday for you to shove off with us. Are you coming or aren't you?"

He didn't answer. He made a beeline for the armor under the ground. Judging by his devil-may-care attitude, nothing I could say would influence him. I don't think that anything mattered in his life except his own utterly selfish lusts and motives.

Boiling inside, I called it quits. I was through with Glenk. Back to the dory—

THE explosion of the revolver startled me. I jumped in a half-turn at the sound of the shot. Glenk whirled

around with the speed of a cat for all his bulk.

Pete Lapous had dropped out of my mind while I argued with Glenk. That scrawny scarecrow, for God knows what reason, had taken a pot-shot at the gray-white stuff. Maybe he had seen movement, or imagined it, or simply possessed a nervous trigger-finger.

He didn't miss. He couldn't have missed at a range of fifty yards.

The picture that registered stunned me. Pete Lapous and Sam Glenk froze with the same paralysis of shock. It must have lasted for many long, precious seconds, and it seemed eternity. My time-sense went awry. I have the memory of a series of separate episodes, each complete in itself, each lasting for a protracted interval. Yet the developments came swift as the wind, caught us unprepared by their almost simultaneous speed.

While we three stood like statues, the outlines of that great mass of pallidly white stuff wavered and rippled. It was like watching a hill flow down to the sea. And yet "wavered" is not the word—the stuff collapsed, billowed out in a pool, flung itself to the ground.

I cannot express the phenomenal velocity that it developed from inertia, hurling itself in a second or less to the ground, and resting there in inertia once more. I sometimes think that it responded in exact tempo with the stimulus that prodded it. When Glenk kicked it, it leisurely formed a depression. When Pete Lapous shot it, it instantly struck back.

And so the building that it concealed was uncovered to our gaze, and I looked with awe at that super-structure, that skeletal, gigantic framework of black metallic rods and filaments.

The interlacing network was infi-

nitely complex. The vertical rods at the four corners of the rectangle, thirty feet tall, as slender as pencils, rested on similar horizontal rods, and supported others—forty feet long for the width of the structure, sixty feet for its length.

From that outer framework, a veritable maze, a labyrinth, a honeycomb of slimmer filaments and rods criss-crossed the interior of the structure. They presented absolutely perfect geometric forms—an outer rectangle, then an inner cube, then a sphere farther in, and a little farther still a pyramid, and beyond the pyramid a cone, and inside the cone other figures, stranger forms, until my vision blurred trying to follow the tracery of that astounding mechanism to its protected core.

Strange as it loomed, terrifying because of its immense size and the wetly glistening sheen, the brilliant luster of those black rods and filaments, it became a thing of far more evil beauty and power, for it seemed to possess a life of its own.

Along each of the outer rods, starting at the corners of the structure, traveled a band of frosty light. Those sixteen rings of silvery black radiance shot along the whole elaborate course of the internal framework and vanished toward the innermost heart, all in an instant.

Then, an instant later, the sixteen bands came streaking out at lesser velocity, to slide for a momentary pause against the outer corners. And from there they shot again, as if catapulted, at dazzling speed along their regulated paths.

It was like the ebb and flow of some unimaginable life-force, the pulse and beat of a perfectly functioning organism, a tireless, effortless, unvarying motion. Perpetual motion—how long

had it been going on? Hundreds of years—thousands? Ever since the giants landed in their shining armor and set it up—dying they must have been from the crushing impact of their starplane, but one of the three lived long enough to fulfill his mission. And here the thing worked still, without motors or engines or driving apparatus of any sort that I could see, unless the principle lay hidden inside the rods or filaments. The frosty rings of light hurtled on their complete circuit, fading inward, bouncing outward, as they would do till the end of earth in the far future, I felt with prophetic surety.

What was that living nightmare? That monstrous entity of grayly white stuff and rigid framework? A single organism whose body could detach itself from the skeleton? A dual being—the one an incubator or rather a restrainer, and the other a spore, an egg, a plasmic seed, the one controlling the other until the day of expansion and growth when conditions were favorable in the declining cycles of earth-life?

The death of the races of man millions of years hence—and then the flowering of the giant-plasm in an environment akin to the conditions on the star-world from which it came.

And what would the giant-plasm hatch? A counterpart of whatever creatures occupied those three shining suits of armor? Or some wholly unpredictable growth that thrived progressively upon a dying planet?

So much registered in the first of those crowded seconds—the collapse of the gray stuff, the revelation of the super-structure.

Then the earthquake, the ground shaking, while my bewildered senses told me that the gray stuff alone caused it—the giant-plasm—it must have weighed thousands of tons, millions of

pounds—enormous density squeezed into a fluid solid.

### 8. Flight

THE earth tremors continued. I felt them as a continuous shaking underfoot. Even they didn't break the trance that held us all rigid. I realized vaguely that the island trembled upon its foundations. The ground would quaver so long as the pool plowed ahead with its terrific weight.

The pallid substance had begun to move after the moment of inertia following its collapse in front of the black framework that had supported it. It forged ahead with quick giant strides.

The puddle had formed a foot thick, a perfect disk. The disk put forth two pincers like the claws of a crab. Those arms curved far forward, inward, and met, at the feet of Pete Lapous. The main body of the pool sloughed up to close the gap to the pincer-like arms.

The ground shuddered and rumbled.

Galvanized into action, Pete turned and sprinted with a yell of frenzied horror.

Again the plasmic mold issued the pincers—and those arching tentacles closed around Pete, lapped near the mound where Glenk and I were rooted. The main mass surged up, closed the intervening space. As it swept across the spot where Pete raced, the foot-thick mass hit his heels with the force of a pile-driver, spurted him high into the air.

The revolver, jolted from his grip, flew off to one side. Pete curved through the air, his arms and legs sprawling, came down head first. I heard the sharp *crack* as his neck broke.

"Run—the dory!" I shouted at Glenk.

Electrified into action as violent as

my previous immobility had been complete, I was off and away faster than I ever thought I could run. Even so, I saw the next swift climax, by keeping my eyes turned only a trifle from the diagonal course that I trekked toward the dory.

Sam Glenk sprang for the pistol. In the face of that colossal, amorphous hulk that thundered across the ground, he still must have placed a frenzied faith in the weapon. His hand closed on it.

Again the flat, circular disk of the entity put forward the long hooks that united at the very feet of Glenk. The main body swept forward, over the corpse of Pete Lapous.

The revolver exploded in a burst of rapid fire, and when the shots ended, the pincer-arms had closed with Glenk inside the fatal circle. Then he ran, and on his white face I saw implanted the hope of leaping across the advance tentacles. But while he sprinted desperately, the mass caught up with him and bowled him over. The mass kept driving on, across his legs, across his torso. Blood leaped in a torrent from his mouth, eyes, nostrils, ears. His shriek pierced the air for the fraction of a second. In that brief interval, the ponderous thing smote him, crushed him, splashed him into another thin red carpet.

I plunged downhill toward the beach. As I stumbled and dropped out of sight of the central plateau, I saw that avid plasm sweep after me. On the edges of the path that it took, the earth furrowed up in long waves, driven, forced aside like mush by the inconceivable density and weight of that gray-white entity.

My heart hammered, and my lungs burned as I ran madly for the boat. Now, behind me, swelled the crash of

vegetation mowed down, and grinding, roaring concussions as the tall dead trees toppled, sheared off and pulverized by the irresistible progress of that juggernaut. Bushes, trees, hills, rocks—nothing could halt or alter the flow of the gray-white tide.

It lapped so close behind me that pure fright prevented me from turning my head to see how close it was when I broke out on the beach. I saw Wanda upright in the dory, holding an oar ready to push off. Behind me thunderous crashes swept across the sand. I thought Wanda would faint, but she pushed, floated the dory, got it moving out as I pounded across the strip of sand. The fatal tentacles slid forward around me, dipped into the sea.

And then I had splashed out in a convulsive spurt and hurled myself over the side of the dory. There came the sound of a booming impact, and a wall of water swept seaward carrying the dory upon its crest as the main mass of the entity hit the ocean.

The giant-plasm, partly on shore, partly on the sea-bed, halted its advance, with long twin banks of earth gouged up on the sides of its path. That mighty trench ran backward with undeviating straightness to the peak of the island. And while we watched, the thing drew back from the water. It reversed its direction, began its journey back to the incubator, flowing uphill as easily as it had slid down.

THAT was the last I saw of it. I must have cracked my skull again when I dived into the dory headlong. The island suddenly reeled away, and upon a vertigo of sickening pain, I floated out to an ocean of blackness.

A constant drone filled my ears when I regained consciousness. I opened my eyes to unfamiliar confines, felt a sense

of lightness and motion. Wanda was sitting beside me. I wondered where the chair came from.

"What the heck!" I exclaimed.

"Don't talk," said Wanda. "You'll have to yell to make yourself heard. If you must talk, don't try to talk sense. You're the proud possessor of a couple of brain concussions. You've been out for a good ten hours."

"But where—"

"In a seaplane—amphibian I guess they're called. Simple enough. The owners of the *Reva* grew worried when the daily radio report stopped coming in. After a week of silence, they chartered a plane to search a wide area. It seems the *Reva* carried a valuable cargo. The plane was just getting ready to abandon the search when the pilot sighted that unchartered island, and us. He came down, picked us up, and took off again. That was this afternoon. It's almost dark now. We'll reach the continent tonight."

I craned my neck to peer out the window. I fancied that behind us, far down on the western horizon, on the rim of the Pacific, against the huge red ball of the setting sun, I saw a speck of lonely land. Back there were the suits of shining armor, the relics of colossal beings, the fallen stone statue, the starplane, the black, skeletonic framework, and the riddle of the giant-plasm. Those things, and Dave Anderson, Pete Lapous, Sam Glenk ground into clay.

Some day I will return—or will I? I wish I could be present to watch what the giant-plasm becomes in whatever cycle of remote future time is set the hour of its emergence—and yet, would my maddest dreams give me preparation enough?

I was content with the darkness that fell.