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FARNSWORTH WRIGHT, Editor



WEIRD TALES ISSUED 1st OF EACH MONTH



"Mulange stooped low above the system, the glowing web dangling from his outstretched fingers."

Giants in the Sky

By FRANK BELKNAP LONG, JR.

An imaginative and astonishing tale, about three super-beings from another cosmos, who snared two humans from Earth in their colossal microscope

THE girl and the man were hurtling through the bright Alpine air when the sun vanished. A chill wind blew upon them and utter darkness engulfed them. They thudded to earth,

turned over, and groped for each other in blackness.

Their skis swished through the deep snow of the high Alps as they thrashed about. The girl began to sob, her hands

seeking the strong hands of her companion. Presently fingers closed tightly over fingers in the mysterious, terrible dark.

The man sobbed: "Margaret, are you hurt?"

The girl's voice was like a whisper from the tomb. "My face is cut. There is blood on my right temple. Oh, darling, what happened?"

The man's fingers tightened. "I do not know," he groaned. "The sun——"

"An eclipse, Peter?"

The man shook his head. "Impossible. The eclipse of 1940 will not even be visible in Switzerland. And it's mathematically impossible for an eclipse to occur ahead of schedule."

"But why did the sun vanish?"

The man said: "I do not know, Margaret. A cloud, perhaps. A sudden over-casting of the sky."

"But no cloud could form so suddenly."

The man started to reply, then drew in his breath sharply. The darkness was dissolving about them, draining away in thin ripples over the snow-covered slopes.

High in the sky to the east the sun glowed again.

But was it the sun? Utter incredulity engulfed the twain as they stared. High in the sky there glowed a triangular sun, a pale blue luminary that shed a diffuse radiance over the peaks about them and cast long, spectral shadows on the tumbled snow.

"Good God!" muttered the man. He got cumbersomely to his feet, helping the girl up with his right arm and using his left for leverage.

Together they stood entranced, staring at a sun swollen to twice its normal bulk, a sun which hung in the pale heavens like a colossal echinoderm, its triangular body encircled by thin, wavering prominences of dazzling brilliance.

They remained speechless for an instant. Then the man said: "We'd best be getting

back to the château. If this isn't a local phenomenon, reports will be coming in by radio."

The girl's fingers tightened in his clasp. "I don't think it's really the sun. The atmosphere may have distorted light—freakishly, inexplicably. It could be a sort of Brocken Specter, couldn't it? Couldn't it, Peter?"

"I don't know. A Brocken Specter is a funnel of light slanting downward. It's a kind of luminous shadow cast upon a cloud by an observer with his back to the sun, a gigantic and misty image in the sky. It doesn't alter the shape of the sun.

"But it *could* be caused by refraction. Only—it's curious it should happen to us."

Despite his mounting apprehension, the man laughed. "Why, dear?"

"Well, because we're meteorologists. If it's an atmosphere phenomenon, our seeing it at close range is dead against the law of averages."

The man's brow furrowed. "Yes, perhaps. But long-odd coincidences are constantly occurring. Foreign correspondents are usually on hand when wars start, and when someone is murdered there is likely to be a detective Johnny mixed up in it. It's more ironic than surprising. We're not merely meteorologists. We're scientifically minded idealists from the New World, appalled by Europe's descent into barbarism. And now a new sun has risen over Europe and we're watching it from the highest——"

"Please don't jest about it," interposed the girl. "It's too—too startling. I'm terribly frightened, Peter."

The man said: "If I thought it was really up our alley I'd wire in a detailed report to the Smithsonian Institution and take the consequences. I'd be disbelieved, of course. Charles Fort collected volumes of data about phenomena as incredible as this and he was laughed out of court. But let's get under way, dear."

Slowly they descended through the heavy snow, holding fast to each other and silent again, fear and apprehension having fastened on their inmost souls.

The shadow fell so unobtrusively across their path that they were completely unaware of it until it dimmed the light about them.

The girl saw it first. She cried out and recoiled in trepidation from a swelling, amorphous blot that darkened the snow beneath them. With appalling swiftness the blot rose and flowed toward them, coiling about their limbs like a writhing taint.

In the depths of the shadow something flashed. Bright and swift as a naked crag emerging from snow in a glacial landslide it smote and sundered the twain, hurling the man backward across the snow and lifting the girl from the mountainside.

The girl shrieked and threw out her arms as the bright object curved about her. It enmeshed her limbs and lifted her so swiftly from Earth that when the man picked himself up she was a whirling mote receding into the sky, a dancing midge gleaming in the rays of the new and incredible sun.

All about him the wind roared and the snow stirred in mysterious travail. There was a roaring in his ears, an adumbration of half-light that chilled his heart like ice. The entire mountain quaked and trembled. The slope buckled, throwing him forward upon his face and half burying him in snow.

He lay moaning and helpless while all about him nature unleashed her furies.

Then, slowly, the mysterious turbulence subsided. The wind died down and the ground ceased to quiver. But though the elements resumed their wonted calm, an aura of intangible menace seemed still to hover over the high Alps, and the silence which ensued was more ghastly than any sound.

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IN THE wan light of the red giant sun the planet Icurus spun steadily on its axis, despite the new world which rested on its bosom. The new world was no larger than the pebbles on the beaches of Icurian seas. It revolved on its own tiny axis, and close to it was its own moon revolving. All about it was a nebulous aurora which streamed outward in luminous waves.

The planet Icurus was billions of miles in circumference, but the midget planet which reposed upon it had a mean semi-diameter of less than four thousand miles. The midget planet was a very weird little world indeed.

Its continents were green with vegetation and black with the concretions of intelligent life. Thousands of animal forms swam and crawled and flew in its waste places and teeming hinterlands, but primarily it was a world of intelligent bipeds who had built beneath the stars titanic concretions of metal and stone.

It had but one satellite, a pale, silvery orb which revolved in the sky two hundred thousand miles from its periphery. The satellite was curious too. It was devoid of water and atmosphere and its entire surface was pitted as though it had collided in space with thousands of Gargantuan meteors.

To the Great Shapes who contemplated that little moon and its green and watery primary on the planet Icurus space was not bounded by the familiar constellations of man. Island universes invisible to earthly telescopes stretched out endlessly above them to the rim of space.

The Great Shapes were clustered about the little, alien globe under the wan light of the red giant sun Lutat. Glowing with reflected sunlight they stood motionlessly in a circle about the aurora-enveloped new world which was smaller than the tiniest

firestone or light-concretion. Above them arched a transparent dome of cyclopean dimensions. Fashioned of glowing crystal it spanned the Icurian landscape for millions of miles in all directions.

The Great Shapes were thousands of miles tall. Vaguely man-like in contour, they loomed beneath the great dome in somber silhouette. The glowing rays of Luta caressed and enveloped them, but beneath the surface-shimmer of the red sun's rays was a curious, weaving opacity which encroached on the brightness, sending rifts of darkness cascading across their stooped shoulders and titan limbs.

The little spinning globe beneath them was revolving about a flaming cube that hung suspended in space. Thousands of miles above the surface of the planet Icurus, but beneath the dome and the Great Shapes' downcast gaze, was a tiny planetary system. Enveloped in a tenuous haze, bisected by auroral beams, nine planets were continuously revolving.

More curious in some respects than the little globe which was absorbing their attention were three of these planets. One was almost as large as the central cube and encircled by a wide, fiery band and ten little moons of almost microscopic dimensions. Another was a dull, mottled globe companioned by four large and five small moons and displaying near its equator a motionless splotch of cloud-vapor as red as a bloodstone. The third was rust-colored, and covered with a fine network of thread-like lines which snaked tenuously in all directions.

One of the Great Shapes stirred suddenly, moving its limbs about and raising its head in the Luta glow. The face that he turned skyward was gray and corrugated. To human perception it would have seemed a repulsive face, but it was not without symmetry, and the individual features hinted at inscrutable endowments of intelligence and power.

The Shape's eyes were on stalks which projected hundreds of miles from the summit of its countenance. Its nose was a flat, triangular depression a thousand miles in diameter and its mouth was a puckered orifice, the outer circumference of which was constantly in motion.

The Great Shape moved slowly in a circle about his companions, his face upraised in contemplation of the shining vault above him. Directly overhead the giant red sun glowed sanguineously in the star-hung firmament, its colossal prominences tapering to the zenith like the radiating arms of some celestial echinoderm. The sky was a sickly cadaverous green, shot through with diffuse shafts of rose and saffron.

There were three Great Shapes about the tiny revolving system. Slowly they shed their immobility, stirring their cyclopean limbs, raising their projecting eyes and regarding each other somberly beneath the dome.

THE moving one was the first to speak. He stopped suddenly in his pacing, and his voice pealed out sonorously amidst the silences.

"It is not a negligible achievement to have traveled to the mysterious center of the mysterious universe, and ensnared an entire planetary system in the shell-nimbus of our radiant absorption nets. With miraculous skill we have preserved this system intact, removing only the central sun and substituting a radiating metatom."

He paused an instant, then resumed: "I remember gazing from the observation cylinder when our great vessel clove the intergalactic abyss, traveling back to Luta through the glowing pores of space. Gloriously we returned from our perilous pilgrimage, our absorption tubes glowing in the light of a million million suns, our absorption nets trailing out behind us.

"I remember gazing from the observa-

tion cylinder, and watching the little, luminous system revolving in the net far behind us. I was proud, proud! I felt that we were akin to the eternal. I spoke of our voyage as a pilgrimage. It was certainly that, a pilgrimage to the mysterious core of the mysterious universe.

"To the Great Architect we must have seemed audacious indeed. But the desire to know, to understand, is so deeply ingrained in us that—well, I feel somehow that it was implanted in us to serve some sublime purpose, some truly cosmic aim."

Another of the Great Shapes spoke then, his voice sonorous with emotion: "That is true, Mulange. Our journey to the core of space was a pilgrimage to an inner shrine, and in making it we drew close to the eternal. We know now that the universe is wonderful beyond description in all its parts, even to the tiniest planet revolving about the tiniest sun."

The one called Mulange said: "I cannot think we did wrong in capturing this strange little system and establishing it here on Icurus in our knowledge vault. But we must not preen ourselves unduly. We returned too swiftly through the space-pores. We should have permitted a little *time* to seep in through the absorption tubes. In returning timelessly, we ruptured the central sun.

"I saw it rupture when we were almost at our journey's end. Before it could destroy the nine little planets I removed it from the system, drawing it by convexial suction from the absorption net, and substituting a metatom in its place."

A third Shape began to pace about, cyclopean shoulders hunched in meditation. "You acted with rare presence of mind, Mulange. The system is still intact. It is only the pathetic little bipeds of Earth who are disturbed by the change."

Mulange said: "*Earth*. I wonder if we pronounce that strange monosyllable correctly. *Earth*."

"The magnification was ten million times," said the second Shape. "It is true that the auditory magnification disk does not function accurately when the sounds are grating, but the Earth-biped has a clear, bell-like voice."

"I should like to examine the Earth-biped again," said Mulange. "It is a most fascinating creature, Shalaan."

The second Shape said: "Yes—well, we can do that."

The third Shape was less massive than Mulange, and had a curiously smooth-textured face. She gave her companions a quick, reproving glance from her stalked eyes, and was suddenly still.

"Mulange is a fool," she said. "The Earth-biped is fascinating as an object of study. But Mulange broods over it. He pities it, and talks to it as though it were an Icurian."

Mulange said: "I was compelled to observe it over a long period of time, Lulalan. How else could I have fathomed its curious, sibilant language? Fortunately it has a habit of talking to itself."

Shalaan said: "It is obviously terrified. I do not think the Earth-bipeds ordinarily talk to themselves."

"Its behavior is peculiar and disturbing," agreed Lulalan.

Mulange said: "Removing it from near the summit of the Earth-mountain was no simple task. When I reached down amid the teeming millions of its kind with micro-nets designed for sport-dredging in the infinitely less minute matrix of a Spaalon colony and captured it alive and unharmed I was filled with elation. When I withdrew the net I thought that the terrible acceleration would kill it. But apparently it can endure an acceleration of eight kutas a cilolan. As soon as I lifted it free of Earth's atmosphere I dropped it into an absorption net and transferred it timelessly to the observation membrane of the magnification tube."

Shalaan said: "Let us examine it again, Mulange."

SLOWLY the three Shapes drew together until they were standing somberly abreast beneath the red giant sun. They remained for an instant immobile, the blood-hued rays caressing their titan bodies and lowered heads. Then in single file they strode ponderously away across the dome.

A luminous mist swirled up about them as they receded from the little, haze-suspended system and progressed through a glowing void which was bounded above by the pale sheen of the dome and beneath by the black, crater-pitted soil of the planet Icurus.

The cyclopean magnification tube loomed obscurely out of the mist. Thousands of miles in circumference, it towered from the pitted soil in rugose segments which gleamed dully in the Lulal light. From its tapering summit there projected a gigantic horizontal disk studded with innumerable tiny depressions, and marginal elevations of sanguinary hue.

In utter silence the Shapes grouped themselves about the great tube, their projecting eyes roving in all directions, their cyclopean arms continuously in motion.

Mulange was the first to speak. "I hope that it has consumed all the food I placed on the observation disk," he said. "It will feed only on minute globules of the creeping green Earth-life."

Lulalan nodded and lowered her great, wrinkled face until it was within a few thousand miles of the summit of the tube. Waveringly her stalked eye descended and glued itself to the instrument of science.

She stared for a moment down into a filmy opacity thousands of miles in depth. Then her titan hands went out and fastened on the uppermost segment of the tube.

"We shall see," she said, and began twisting the segment about with her fingers.

Slowly the opacity dissolved, becoming crystal-clear. In the depths of the glowing instrument a tiny shape sprang suddenly into view.

The Earth-woman was sitting cross-legged in the center of the observation membrane, her head bent sharply forward, her long auburn hair descending to her knees. Only her bent back and slender limbs were visible to Lulalan's downward-peering gaze.

Lulalan removed her eye from the tube and murmured: "All the food is gone, Mulange."

Mulange exclaimed joyously: "Then it will live, Lulalan! As you know, it refused nourishment at first. Then it fed voraciously, and refused nourishment again.. But if *all* the food is gone——"

"An encouraging sign, of course," interposed Shalaan. "But we must not be too optimistic."

Mulange moved closer to the tube, his great, corrugated face twitching with emotion. He did not even glance at Lulalan. In tremulous haste he shouldered his companions aside, and his stalked eyes descended swiftly, converging at the summit of the tube.

Lulalan said: "You see, Shalaan. He must look at it with both eyes, as though it were a dear companion. He must see it in relief, because it is lovely in his sight. Oh, I am bereft, Shalaan."

Mulange ignored her. He was looking down at the little shape, his face glowing with tenderness and rapture.

The Earth-woman seemed suddenly to become aware of the great eye millions of miles above her. She stirred on the membrane and raised her pale face. For a moment she remained staring upward, seeing only a white, starless sky-vault and a colossal shadow which merged with the fathomlessness of alien space.

Then she got gropingly to her feet. Swaying and moaning, she raised her puny

hands and drew back the hair from her countenance, dividing it into two silky strands. Her eyes were dark, tormented.

Mulange murmured: "Poor, pitiful little one. If only I could comfort you!"

Shalaan shrugged impatiently. "Lulalan is right, Mulange. You are really ill."

Mulange did not reply. He was watching the little form stagger across the membrane, arms upraised in pitiful appeal.

From the projecting disk at the summit of the tube a despairful cry issued. "Peter! Peter!"

To Mulange, who saw the Earth-woman's lips move, the voice which issued from the auditory magnification disk was poignantly moving—a tragic, intimate cry. But to his companions it was merely an interesting amplification of sound—a startlingly clear magnification of an Earth-biped's micro-speech.

"It is always using that monosyllable," said Shalaan. "*Peter*. Perhaps Peter is another name for Earth."

Mulange raised his eyes from the tube, his great face wan with compassion. "If I could bring her *Peter*," he said.

"I'm weary of watching you brood over it," said Shalaan irritably. "If I were Lulalan I would seek another companion."

Lulalan bent her head. Mulange drew close to her, his elephantine footfalls echoing across the dome.

"Do not grieve, Lulalan," he murmured tenderly. "It is a momentary madness. It will pass. The deep affection which unites us is indestructible, and we shall remain dear companions until we die."

Shalaan said: "This is all very annoying. I prefer the company of our nine little planets."

Abruptly he turned and strode away across the dome.

Lulalan said: "I pity you, Mulange. You are weak and foolish."

Mulange made no attempt to detain her when she followed Shalaan into the

mist. He stood straight a moment beside the tube, his enormous face grief-shadowed. He knew the wonder of Lulalan, and his need of her was great. But in his titan body a strange madness surged.

Within the tube was a speck of animate matter tinier than the mist-grains which clogged the nuclei of light-concretions invisible to his naked vision. Yet that minute speck was infinitely precious in his sight.

SLOWLY he bent again and applied his eye to the summit of the tube.

The Earth-woman was lying at full length on the observation membrane, her tiny form racked with sobs. Her long hair was spread out fanwise over her slender body, enmeshing its whiteness in a red-gold web that glimmered under the stupendous magnification with little wavering coruscations of light.

"Do not grieve, little one," Mulange murmured. "I will watch over you and protect you."

Out of the mist boomed a sonorous voice. "Mulange, come here. The most extraordinary light has appeared on the planet Earth."

Mulange straightened abruptly, his colossal limbs jerking in sudden wonder. Casting upon the tube a look of infinite tenderness and yearning, he turned about and strode swiftly forward through the mist.

Lulalan and Shalaan were grouped about the little revolving system, their light-aureoled heads down-bent when he came striding toward them out of the Lulal glow.

Lulalan raised sorrow-filmed eyes and looked at him accusingly, her great body tremulous with grief. But Shalaan's eyes were shining. He seemed very excited indeed.

"We were watching Earth when we saw a blinding flash of light," he said, "a brilliant white flare which obscured the polar

continent. It lingered an instant, then vanished."

Mulange said: "One of Earth's fire-belching cones, perhaps. An eruption of the planet's interior heat."

Lulalan said: "We have watched five of the cones in eruption. The flames were less fugitive, less brilliant. No, this was an unique eruption."

"Well, we shall see," said Mulange.

He turned abruptly, and strode away through the mist. When he returned he was clutching in his gigantic hand a small, fine-textured web that glowed iridescently in the Lotal light.

"We shall dredge above the region of the eruption with a micro-net," he said.

Shalaan said: "An excellent idea, Mulange. But you must float the net down gradually. The little fleecy atmosphere concretions near the planet's surface will clog its pores unless you manipulate it with great skill and precision."

"I will not dredge in the lower atmosphere," replied Mulange. "If the eruption really was violent and extensive, we shall find debris scattered in the tenuous vapor-strata high above the planet's crust."

Shalaan lowered his stalked eyes in assent. "I understand, Mulange. It is even conceivable that you will find debris out beyond the planet's satellite. Would it not be wise to simply lower the net and sweep it in a wide arc through space?"

Lulalan said: "Perhaps we should examine the region under a small magnification tube first, probe with sight into the vapor-strata. You succeeded very well when you examined the little bipeds' habitations through the tube."

Mulange said: "Yes, but the tube looms menacingly in their skies. They are sufficiently terrified already."

"I believe we shall succeed better with the net," agreed Shalaan. "Lower it, Mulange."

Mulange stooped low above the system,

the glowing web dangling from his outstretched fingers. Bending his gaze on the Earth, he floated the porous snare down slowly, manipulating it with such skill that it was soon dangling directly above the little, spinning planet. Slowly his great hand moved to and fro in the Lotal light.

"Are you dredging beyond the satellite?" asked Shalaan, peering curiously over Mulange's hunched shoulders.

Mulange raised one of his stalked eyes and bent its vision backward into Shalaan's gray shadowy face. The other eye he kept trained on Earth.

"Yes, Shalaan. I am simply sweeping the net back and forth as you suggested."

Suddenly his great body began to quiver. He remained in a stooping posture, but his hand ceased to move, and the eye that was trained on Shalaan's face straightened out and coiled downward to join its companion.

Lulalan said: "What is it, Mulange? You haven't ensnared the satellite?"

Mulange raised his great face suddenly.

"The net is heavier," he said. "I have either enmeshed a large firestone, or some debris from the eruption. We shall know presently."

Shalaan and Lulalan stood very still, watching him as he maneuvered the net out of the planet-studded haze and held it up in the Lotal glow. Its iridescent meshes cascaded over the vast gray hollow of his hand like waves breaking on an Icurian beach.

Six stalked eyes studied the net as it rested on his titan palm. Four stalked eyes turned away bewildered, their vision frustrated by the web's glowing sheen. Only Mulange remained steadfastly staring, his face impassively raised a few thousand miles from the Lotal-reddened meshes.

Suddenly he said: "Yes, there is a tiny object in the net. It is larger than a firestone, but I cannot distinguish it clearly."

"Then we must place it under the magnification tube," said Shalaan.

Lulalan spoke then for the first time. "We will place it on the disk with the Earth-biped," she said.

Slowly Mulange lowered his hand. "How can we be sure that it will not harm her?" he exclaimed, apprehension in his tone.

Shalaan said: "If it is not radiant, it will not harm her. Enough of this foolishness, Mulange."

Somberly the Great Shapes drew together again and returned in silence to the tube.

Mulange seemed reluctant to relinquish the web. He stood with stooped shoulders before the great instrument, holding the web on his palm, his eyes focussed on Shalaan's rugose face.

He was reluctant to oppose Shalaan. Shalaan was the oldest living Icurian—and the wisest. No one had ever opposed Shalaan.

Lulalan said: "Give me the net, Mulange. I will insert it in the tube."

Mulange's great body seemed to droop. He extended his hand and turned away, his face quivering.

Lulalan held the net firmly between her fingers and squatted in the red Lulal light, fumbling with her free hand at the base of the tube. The tube's lowermost segment divided at her touch. As though by magic fission its cylindrical bulk became two gleaming half-cones. Lulalan let the net slip from her fingers and stood up. Instantly the half-cones coalesced again.

The interior mechanism of the tube was complex and ingenious. The dropped web was automatically sucked into a defining vortex and transferred to the observation membrane with microscopic precision.

Lulalan regarded Mulange for an instant in silence. Then she said: "Examine it, Mulange. I can see that you are tormented by misgivings."

Quivering, Mulange's stalked eyes descended and glued themselves to the summit of the tube. The magnification mechan-

ism was still adjusted to his vision. With startling clarity the observation membrane came into view in the glimmering depths of the tube.

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THERE were now two objects on the membrane. The Earth-woman was standing quiveringly erect under crystal-bright skies, her tiny body enveloped in a red-gold glory, her pale face suffused with wonder. A short distance away a long cylindrical shape rested slantwise on the slide, its glowing bulk enmeshed in the porous, shimmering folds of the micro-net.

The shining cylinder dwarfed the Earth-woman's minikin form and cast faint, irregular shadows on the polished surface of the membrane. The entire lateral surface of the cylinder was studded with tiny, knob-like elevations which revolved continuously in the crystalline radiance that flooded the interior of the tube.

Suddenly, as Mulange stared, one of these elevations ceased to rotate. Its circumference contracted and a wide band of light streamed outward from its extremity across the cylinder's bulk.

The Earth-woman was moving now. Her eyes strangely luminous, she was advancing toward the cylinder with faltering steps.

From the light-rimmed projection a tiny form emerged. Leaping abruptly into view, it stood aureoled in the upstreaming glow. Though it was no larger than the Earth-woman, its contours were grotesque. Its head was a shining ebon globe, its limbs segmented and awkwardly dangling. In the center of its bulbous face a single eye glowed dully.

The figure had emerged near the tapering extremity of the cylinder. Beneath it was a gleaming convexity which sloped gradually to the surface of the membrane. Above it arched the glistening meshes of the micro-net.

When the Earth-woman reached the base

of the cylinder her slender hands darted to her throat. She swayed a little and stood staring up through the crystalline glow at the tiny, segmented baroque far above her.

Slowly the little form started down the sloping surface of the cylinder, its body slanting backward, its globular head bobbing curiously on its shoulders.

Although the cylinder's surface was slightly corrugated, the descent was a perilous one. Twice the little figure stumbled and nearly fell. But with slow, unwieldy movements it regained its precarious balance and continued to move downward, arriving at last at the base of the cylinder where the Earth-woman was waiting.

For an instant it stood very still regarding her, its grotesque body swaying from side to side. Then it raised tiny, claw-like hands and clutched at its globular head.

A pulsing horror quivered through Mulange's great body.

The little shape was removing its head. Slowly it lifted the gleaming globe in the crystalline glow, slowly it shed its segmented outer skin. Slowly and incredibly at the base of the cylinder the little shape emerged transformed from its coverings.

Standing before the Earth-woman at the base of the cylinder was a tiny Earth-man, a strange dazzlement in his eyes, his body quivering with emotion.

The Earth-woman was quivering too—quivering, sobbing! "Peter! Peter! Oh, my darling, my dear one!"

The thing which happened then was utterly incomprehensible to Mulange. The Earth-man cried out exultantly, caught the Earth-woman in his arms, and pressed his face with incredible vehemence against her hair and lips and eyes.

It was incomprehensible to Mulange. And yet—all the stars of heaven seemed to go out as he stared. All his world grew dark about him, abysmally, shudderingly dark. Even Lital ceased to warm him.

The Earth-man was murmuring softly: "I thought I was going to my death. But we had to know. We had to know what had happened to our universe. All the stars were gone, and the sun—the sun was alien and strange, a radiant cube in the heavens, an unfathomable field of force.

"With Governmental backing the Smithsonian Institution constructed a rocket, enlisting the aid of our foremost scientists and engineers, and raising funds by popular subscription.

"I volunteered my services, Margaret. I offered to pilot the rocket. Three days ago I was shot away from Earth's southern pole at a constantly accelerating speed. When I passed the heavy-side layer, automatic controls regulated the power, reducing it again to the square of the distance which I——"

Mulange did not linger to hear more. Slowly he withdrew his gaze from the magnification tube, his great body drooping, quivering. He did not look at his companions. Tormented, despairing, he stumbled blindly away through the mist.

Lital was low in the heavens when Lulalan found him. He was lying sprawled out at full length on the pitted soil, his limbs twisted about the crater-like nest of an Icurian tube creeper, his cyclopean shoulders tremulous in the waning sunlight.

Lulalan stood for an instant gazing down at him, her great, wrinkled face luminous with compassion.

Then she knelt and began tenderly to stroke his back.

"Do not grieve, Mulange," she murmured. "We are together again. We shall be dear companions until we die."

Slowly Mulange stirred. He untwined his limbs, turned ponderously about, and raised his face in the red glow.

"I need you, Lulalan," he murmured. "Without you, my life would be desolate indeed."