

Starting Next Issue: THIRTY-TWO ADDITIONAL PAGES!

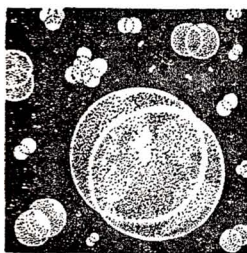
STARTLING STORIES

Vol. 18, No. 1

A THRILLING PUBLICATION

September, 1948

A Complete Novel



What Mad Universe

By FREDRIC BROWN

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SHENADUN

Explorer Gowan Mitchell battles to conquer the challenge of the strange mountain—and make it reveal its secrets!

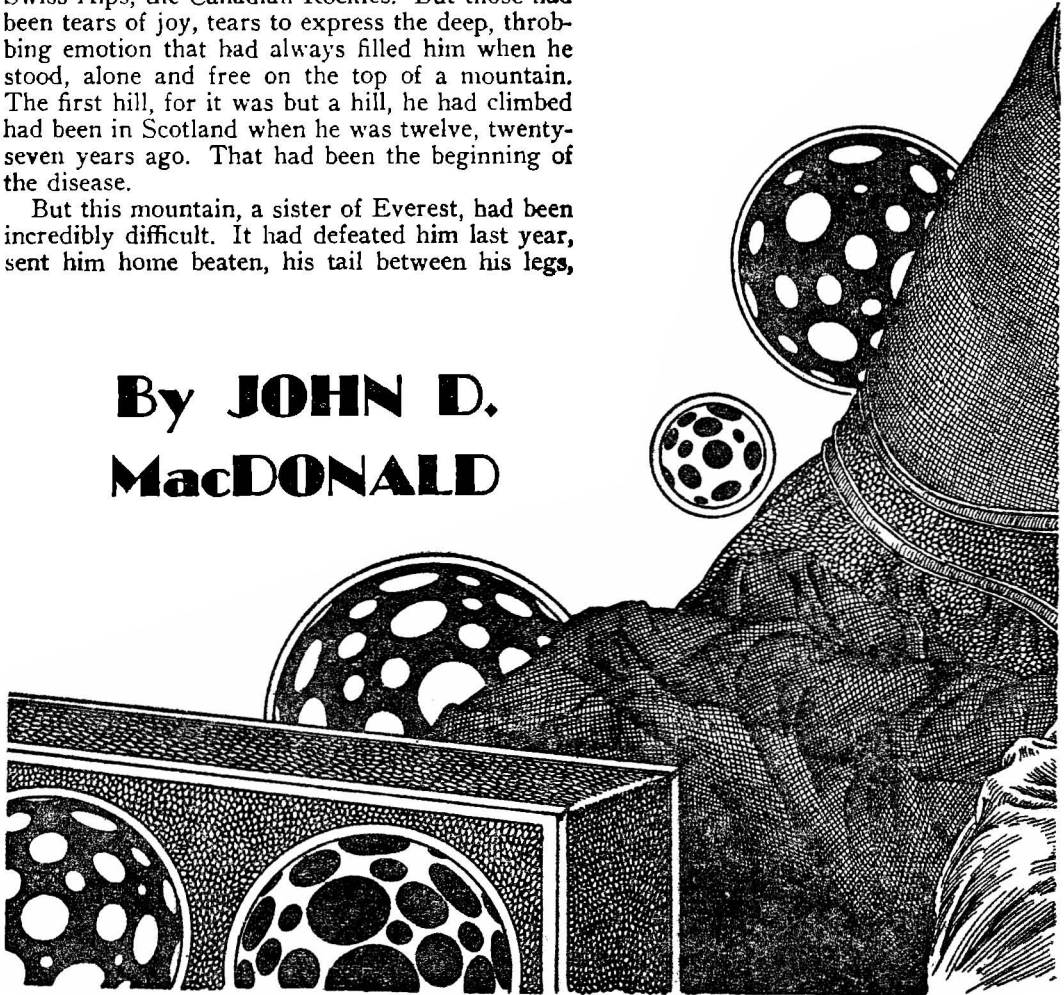
HE HAD hammered the piton into a crack in the unthinkable aged rock. By rights the last hundred feet of the ascent should have been gentle, easy. Here on the roof of the world, on the white shining summit of Shenadun, the bitter wind hammered at him, screamed shrill warnings in his ears. There should have been a gentle slope.

He wanted to weep. It was unthinkable that he, Gowan Mitchell, should weep in frustration—and at a stubborn mountain.

As, buffeted by the wind, he threaded the rope through the eye of the piton, he thought of other tears and other mountains. Peaks in the Swiss Alps, the Canadian Rockies. But those had been tears of joy, tears to express the deep, throbbing emotion that had always filled him when he stood, alone and free on the top of a mountain. The first hill, for it was but a hill, he had climbed had been in Scotland when he was twelve, twenty-seven years ago. That had been the beginning of the disease.

But this mountain, a sister of Everest, had been incredibly difficult. It had defeated him last year, sent him home beaten, his tail between his legs,

**By JOHN D.
MacDONALD**





"Do not be afraid," she said in a rich contralto voice

his broken shoulder in a cast.

Shenadun! Stranger than Everest, stronger in the superstition of those who lived in the tropical valleys and watched the high bitter shoulders of the Himalayas!

Fortunate for Gowan Mitchell that he had inherited the money that made it possible for him to spend his life conquering the high places of the world.

He paused after having drawn some of the rope through the eyelet of the piton, reached a numb hand to the snap on his shoulder, unhooked the flexible tube and gave himself a careful measure of oxygen, being careful not to take too much. Too much would have made him giddy, would have made the careful handholds and footholds less secure. He inhaled just enough for life and strength, and to combat the numbing weakness of the almost incredible altitude of Shenadun.

This mountain climbing feat was costing him ten thousand pounds. It would make a small hole in the estate but not too large a hole. He would have enough left for future attempts, but there would be no future efforts on a scale such as this one. After Shenadun was conquered he would be content with less difficult peaks. After all, he thought, I am thirty-nine. The conquest of Shenadun will give me immortality among those who climb.

But he knew that he would continue to climb until at last he died. There could be nothing for him in the cities of men. His mind and his heart would always be fixed on the high places. The cities of men were drab small places, overrun with life. For him there could be only the clean cruel wind of the ceiling of the world, the aching slow progress up a chimney of rock, the clink of an ice axe, the thunder of the avalanche.

It was good luck to have found the bare rock where pitons could be planted. He thought of the man who clung, patient and brave, thirty feet below him and he smiled. He would have a witness when he reached the summit. The spearhead of the enormous effort expressed by the eight camps stretched out down the flank of the mountain, a day's hard climb apart, where even now chilled numb hands held binoculars to eager eyes and men with white rime on their ragged beards looked aloft and cursed the storm that cut off all vision.

MITCHELL'S climbing partner for the final attack was Joseph Carmon. Car-

mon was brave, strong, agile and selfless. Gowan Mitchell knew that he couldn't have a better partner for the last assault on the virgin peak, and it was essential to his plans that Joseph Carmon must be along. Had it been a gentle slope at the summit, Mitchell would have climbed it alone.

He looked down, saw the red, windbeaten face of Carmon. He tightened the rope through the piton, gave the arm signal to Carmon to climb up to him. He took a turn around the shank of the piton, and pulled in the slack carefully as the man below him, slow and cautious, facing the rock wall, came up like some strange bearlike animal.

That ascent would have been impossible without assistance from Joseph Carmon, the American. As it was, he would have to share the glory with Carmon, and yet he would be the first human to stand on the peak.

His thoughts snapped back to instant attention as Carmon slipped, and the rope tightened. Mitchell took another turn around the shank of the piton. There, it was firm! The wind clawed at Carmon, swinging him out away from the rock wall. Carmon swung in against the wall, hit heavily, scrambled for a handhold.

At that moment a free end of the rope was flung up—and Joseph Carmon was gone. Completely gone, as though he had never existed. The flurry of ice below cut off Gowan Mitchell's view. He shut his eyes for a moment. The body of Carmon would fall free for a hundred feet, hit the incredibly steep ice and slide down and down, at last going over the brink that would mean a free fall to the glacier two thousand feet below.

He had a sudden feeling of sickness. Now he would be the only man to reach the summit of Shenadun.

In a matter of moments he was standing on the piton, reaching above for handholds. He found a crack in the rock, wide enough for his gloved fingers as he reached for another foothold. Getting the handhold, he carefully and cautiously raised himself higher, allowing for the blind fury of the wind. And now the rock wall was gone, and his fingers were touching the firm sheen of ice. He got the ice ax free, drove it in deeply and, clinging to the haft, pulled himself up over the brink into the full grasp of the wind. He stood at last on the summit of Shenadun!

For all he could see of the world below, he might have been standing on a small knoll

in the middle of an endless plain.

The summit was shaped like a vast hassock, cylindrical, with a faintly rounded top. The rock wall up which he had just come was duplicated, he knew, on all sides of the gently sloping central portion of the hassock. Filled with fierce exaltation, he lowered his head against the blast and fought his way to the exact center of the round dome. It wasn't a long walk. The summit must have been two hundred yards across, and from the edge of the cliff to the center of the summit meant a rise of only ten or twelve feet. He walked on the shale ice of ages past.

He knelt and, with numb hands, took out the jointed aluminum flagstaff, fitted it together and planted it in the hole he dug with the point of his ice ax. The flag of his country whipped in the wind. At the base of the shaft he buried the little metal container that had been prepared—his name and the date, and the name of Joseph Carmon.

All around him was a white and blowing wildness. It was time to return. He must hurry down.

He stopped dead in his tracks, leaning against the wind that sought to tear him from the summit and fling him out into space.

He wondered stupidly why he hadn't thought of it before. There could be no descent without Joseph Carmon. They might send rescuers tomorrow, but by tomorrow he would be frozen, as dead and as rigid as the eternal ice.

So this was the end of it all. This was the end of the high, wild, hard life. Here against the sky that would soon turn to night. He shivered, took another measured amount of the oxygen. Not a scrap of food. No small gasoline stove. Those items had been left behind for the sake of speed during the final dash to the summit.

Out of his long experience he knew that there would be no use trying to return the way he had come. There were pitches that could only be negotiated by two men, working with perfect coordination. For a man alone they were impossible.

It was a choice of ways to die. He could fall through the thin frigid air to shatter against the shoulders of the mountain, or remain on the summit. It would be a high wild grave.

Abruptly the wind stopped. Above him the sky was a clear gray. He walked weakly to the edge and looked down. He could not see the camps, of course. He stood and waved

his arms. They would see him. They would know that he had done it. Soberly he turned and walked back, slumped on the ice near the aluminum shaft. His mind was made up. It was an end to adventure. It would be an easy death, bringing a bit of fear, maybe—fear of the unknown. Then as he began to freeze, his blood would slow and he would become comfortably and deliciously warm. He would flatten his cheek against the ice and find eternal rest against the changeless sky.

Death could come with the night. There would be another two hours of fading daylight and for those two hours he would be master of the mountaintop, King of Shenadun. He smiled bitterly. The King would survey his domain. He no longer felt the need of oxygen now that the exertion of climbing was done. Yes, he would make a circuit of his kingdom and have a last look at the world.

HE LEFT the bit of rope and his other equipment by the aluminum shaft. With only his ice ax he walked toward the cliff. There was no sound in all the world now that the wind had stopped. It had cleared so that he could see other peaks. Far off to the southeast was Everest. It would have been better to die on the summit of Everest. Far better.

He turned away from it angrily. For many minutes he could not recover his calm, could not reconcile himself again to the death that awaited him. Just one more peak to climb, just one more moment to feel the sun on his bronzed face.

An odd thing caught his attention. From a deep rift in the ice of the peak, a runnel of ice, like a frozen stream of water, went over the brink. He jammed the point of his ax into the ice and leaned over the brink. Odd! It was like an enormous icicle. The rift was narrow, and only a few feet long. Odd that ice should run from it, as though warm air came up through the rift.

He dropped on his face and peered down into the blackness of the rift. Could that be a faint breath of warmth? Not real warmth, but merely air a few degrees warmer than the forty below temperature of the summit.

Trembling in excitement, he pulled off his glove and stretched his numbed hand down into the rift. It was warmer!

He had no time to reason why. There could be no logical reason. All he could think

of was to get down closer to that warmth. He got to his feet, braced himself and began to work with the wide edge of the ice axe, using the practised strokes of a man who could cut thousands of steps in the ice in a day. With each almost leisurely swing, a lump of shining ice jumped clear of the bite of the edge. He angled his strokes so that the chips bounced out of the rift, out of the odd crack across the ice surface.

In time he felt the need to go back after the oxygen. A few breaths helped him. The exertion was making him warmer. Eventually he had hollowed out each wall so that he could lower himself down into the rift, his head below the surface of the summit. It did seem warmer. Much warmer.

Working down in the rift was much more difficult. For a time he was able to shove the ice chips into the other portion of the rift, then that became filled and he was forced to widen the part on which he stood so that the chips would not fall back to where he wished next to strike.

He began to lose track of time. He felt weak and dizzy and when he next tried the oxygen flask, it was empty. Angrily he flung it up over the side. Forcing himself to work, and yet avoiding breaking into a fatal sweat, he cut his way down through the steel-gray ice.

His strokes grew awkward as space became more constricted. The sides were beginning to be too high to throw the loose ice out. Soon he would have to stop. And he had not, as yet, found the origin of the warmer air.

He swung his ax and, in the still air, it made an odd sound. Metallic, one might say. He thought that he might be down to rock. The daylight was fading. He struck again, got down onto hands and knees and brushed the ice flakes away from a smooth surface.

Metal!

It was clear, gray-blue, flawless metal. Metal that had been machined! Across the space he had cleared was a curved line in the substance, a joining, like a portion of a circle. He pulled his glove off again and held his hand against the metal. It was barely warmer.

Oxygen starvation was making his mind giddy and foolish. He laughed aloud. It was absurd! He, Gowan Mitchell was the first to climb Shenadun! This was a mirage. No one could have been here before him, burying metal monstrosities in the ice.

He uncovered the clean crack in the metal and discovered that it was a perfect circle, but not a trap door for a man to go through. It was too large to be designed for that. He saw where the warmer air escaped. At one point the circular crack was a tiny bit wider than at any other part.

Grunting, he forced the point of his ice axe down into the crack. He tried to pry but it slipped out with a pinging noise. He could feel himself growing weaker. He tried again, and again it slipped. Night was coming fast. For the second time in a few hours, the tears of frustration filled his eyes. The third attempt caused a small grating noise and, as he pried, the round plug tilted, turning in the hole so that it was on edge, a semicircular opening on each side.

Grinning idiotically, he dropped onto his face, the ice ax in his hand and reached down into the blackness. He touched nothing. Warm air came from the opening. Warm breathable air, but not enough to keep him alive, though he spent the night on his stomach, his head in the opening.

He must enter the hole or die. That had become the choice. Before it had been a choice of two ways of dying. Maybe this was better. He wondered if he had enough strength to hang by his hands from the edge and see if his feet touched anything. But strength evaporated even as he thought of it. He reached under his mountain jacket, pulled his knife from its sheath and dropped it into the hole. It thudded against something, but he couldn't tell how far below. Sense of elapsing time goes astray with oxygen starvation.

NOT to enter the hole was to die anyway. He lowered his feet into it, sat on the edge for a moment, then turned, his stomach against the edge. His elbow slipped on an ice fragment and, with a cry of alarm, he slid, feet first, into the blackness. The back of his head hit the metal plug. He fell fifteen feet and landed on a yielding surface. He looked up barely in time to see the plug, turned by the impact, settle back into place.

He was in utter and complete darkness. The surface under his feet sloped gently. He stretched out a hand and felt a smooth metal wall at his elbow. In a moment he located the other wall. The air was warmer. Warm enough to sustain life, and there was more oxygen in it. On hands and knees, he found his knife, replaced it in its sheath.

His mind wouldn't work properly. He thought, I am in a sort of corridor on a soft floor which slants. It seems to be about ten feet wide. I don't know where it goes. I will not die in here during the night. I am weary and I am afraid.

Suddenly he remembered that the sound of human voice will often give an idea of the size of a dark place. He shouted. His voice went off into a vast, unbelievable hollowness, echoing against untold distances of metal, fading at last into a distant brazen clang. It was then that he felt the fear. He had always thought of himself as being braver than the average. But his bravery had existed in known situations, against known odds. Now he faced the unknown, and he had in his heart the fear of a small child left alone in the dark.

He couldn't bring himself to shout again.

Suddenly he remembered the packet of matches. He lighted one. The flame burned weakly. He held it high and saw how impossible it would be for him to ever reach the circular trap. He couldn't even make out the lines of the joining. The walls shone, reflecting the match light.

It burned his fingers and he shook it out. The second match showed him that the stuff on which he stood was something like a plastic and something like fabric. It seemed to be woven. There was a gap between it and the metal wall. He inserted his fingers in the gap and felt nothing.

Wishing to hoard his matches, and realizing that it would be better to keep moving than to stand where he was, he put his hand against the metal wall and followed the sloping floor of the passageway.

The slope was definite. With each step his feet thudded heavily. It was when he had walked a thousand steps that he halted. This was an absurdity. He knew that the flat top of the mountain was but two hundred yards across, and he knew the steepness of the rock cliff. It would be impossible to go a thousand steps on this incline without going beyond the rock wall of the cliff.

The third match answered his problem. Above him, only ten feet above his head, was stuff similar to that on which he walked. He knew then that he was in an enormous spiral which, inside the mountain, went around and around, taking him constantly lower. As he walked in the blackness, he kept touching the inner wall. He knew that each complete circle must be taking him around and

around some sort of enormous steel cylinder. No, not steel, something else. He wondered if the inside of the cylinder were hollow.

After a time he grew less cautious about walking forward into the darkness and quickened his steps. The softness of the stuff under his feet was deceptive. He fell once, tripping and rolling for several feet. Where his face touched the floor, the skin was rubbed off as though he had touched a file.

The longer he walked, the warmer the air grew. He guessed that it was well above zero by now. It seemed to have a very acceptable oxygen content. And the longer he walked the more impressed he grew with the pure impossibility of such a project.

He remembered how every item used in the expedition had to be carried on the heads of the bearers across countless weary miles. Yet here was an undertaking that would stagger the industrial capabilities of a large country.

He walked on, his legs beginning to shake with weariness. He had no watch with him. He lost track of the hours. For a time he counted his steps. He counted until he lost track of the numbers, not knowing whether the next number should be eight thousand or nine thousand.

Shaking with weariness he stopped and stretched out on his back, his head up the slope, too tired to think or imagine. He was asleep in seconds.

When he awoke, it was many seconds before he remembered his predicament. Lost in the bowels of a mountain, traveling down the gentle slant of a passageway that seemed to go on forever. There was no abatement in the thick blackness that surrounded him. His mouth was dry. He knew that he had slept for a long time. He had no way of telling how long.

Around and around he went, constantly downward. Idiotically downward, perpetually downward. It grew warmer. Finally he threw his hood back and it seemed hours later, he took his jacket off and carried it folded across his arm. Hour followed incredible hour. His mind reeled as he contemplated the work that had gone into the construction of such a thing.

At last, as he was growing intensely weary, he stopped. He could detect a faint light, so faint as to be almost unnoticeable. Could it be there was an end to this incredible, infernal passageway? He began to hurry, stumbling in his eagerness. Daylight loomed

ahead, maybe some cave at the base of the mountain.

As he hurried, the light grew stronger and brighter, a white light that could be nothing but daylight. It was light enough so that he could see clearly the gradual and constant curve of the passageway, the shining metal walls. He took his hand from the wall. He could move more quickly.

BRIGHTER and brighter became the radiance. Ahead he saw something, some change in the corridor. As he came down to it he stopped. The corridor had widened out into a high ceilinged cubical room. The resilient floor material stopped. The floor was of metal. The light came from four shining discs set into the wall. They sent forth a clear white light. He touched a disc. It was cold light. Not daylight.

At the far side of the room, the downward corridor began again. He walked to it. The flexible floor covering seemed to curl back on itself around metal rollers so as to form a continuous strip. It was then that he noticed an array of levers. They were set high, parallel to the floor and on a level just above his head. He could see by the slots into which they fitted that they could move either up or down.

With a feeling of awe, he reached up, grasped one and pulled it down. It moved easily. An odd symbol was embossed on the handle. The handle was too big around for him to grasp easily. Nothing happened. Nothing at all.

Better continue on down the dark corridor. He walked toward it, then stopped in amazement. The floor of the corridor was moving, moving without noise, with just the faint breeze of its passage.

He ran back to the levers and, in a few moments had figured them out. The one he had not touched controlled the escalator floor of the passage he had just left. Pulling it down caused it to run silently down and, had it been turned on, it would have brought him without effort to the square room.

The lever he first touched controlled the flooring he had been about to step onto. The further down the lever was forced, the faster it moved. At its maximum speed, it moved with a faint whistling noise, so fast that he knew he would be unable to leap onto it without injury.

He adjusted it to the fastest speed he could manage, crouched and leaped onto it and

was carried away into the increasing gloom. He sat, crosslegged, grasping the haft of his ice ax, and suddenly began to laugh like a child at a street carnival.

The floor of the corridor moved almost without sound and the breeze of his passage was fresh and cool on his cheeks.

"Splendid service," he said aloud. "Thank you very much, whoever you may be."

After the laughter come the fear. Fear of being carried down into the depths of the dark earth. Fear of what he could not see. Fear of the mind of someone—something—capable of building a thing such as this.

In time the laughter and the fear were both gone, and his head nodded. The slight motion of the moving corridor made him sleepy. He fought it for a time and at last the ax slipped from his hand and he was stretched on his side, being carried into the blackness.

The cruel jar of a fall dazed him. He awakened even as he was still sliding along the polished metal floor, the ice ax under him, his eyes blinking in the white light. It was very warm. He stood up quickly. He was in a huge room, so terrifyingly huge that he knew at last that he had reached the bottom of the corridor.

Behind him, and three feet in the air, the end of the corridor floor revolved rapidly and silently around the rollers. A lever projected from a cubical box beside it. He walked over and pushed the lever. The corridor floor slowed and stopped.

He looked at the vast room. He had no way of guessing its length. On the nearest wall were huge discs of light, similar to the smaller ones he had seen. They appeared to be at least a yard across and twenty feet apart. Yet, in the remote distance of the big room, perspective made them look like a fine white continuous line.

In spite of the lights, the main effect was of shadows and dimness. He craned his neck, looking up. A ceiling was a short distance above him. Yet, after he walked a dozen steps, the ceiling was gone. He looked up into limitless blackness. He had lost all sense of direction.

The silence was what made him fearful. It was the silence of the long dead, the silence of the tomb, the dead, still, soundlessness of eternity.

He stepped forward and the ice caulks in his climbing boots clinked against the floor. He shouted once, and for long seconds the echoes answered him, diminishing and dis-

torting his shout until at last all was silent again. He remembered nightmares he had experienced as a child. This vast room had a nightmare quality.

He looked around and decided that the huge discs must lead somewhere. Best to follow them, rather than to wander off across the shadows. The clink, clink of the caulks was the only sound in the world.

After five minutes of steady walking, he noticed a darker shadow, thin and elongated, on the floor parallel to the wall and about thirty feet away. He went out to it. It was a mammoth rail, projecting a foot above the floor level and nearly a foot wide. Beyond it, another forty or so feet away, he saw what might be another. But the room was darker further from the wall. And he was rapidly learning to fear the darkness—and the immutable silence.

The lights stretched out ahead, seemingly into infinity. Gowan Mitchell walked steadily. The world of high mountains was far behind. He still clutched the ice ax, thinking of it as a weapon.

AT LAST he heard a sound. The splash-
ing of water. It was off in the shadows. Carefully he walked toward it, his eyes adjusting to the lesser light. He found that the distant opposite wall had moved nearer and the metal was replaced by jagged rock, damp and rough. A trickle of water fell into a dark shining pool. Thirstily he dropped on his stomach, scooped it up in his hands. It was cool and delicious. He drank deeply, went on refreshed. Hunger was the most pressing problem. Inured to hardships, he knew that he could continue long after the average city-bred man would collapse from weakness.

In the distance, the lights stopped. Abruptly. Beyond them—the darkness. He had cold fear in his heart, wondering if he was doomed to walk the enormous echoing chambers forever, dying at last close to the brink of the cold pool.

He stood by the last light, the last glowing disc set flush with the metal wall. Ahead he could barely make out a huge arched doorway, fully twenty feet high and ten feet wide. He strained his eyes, but could not see beyond it.

Tightening his grip on the haft of the ice ax, he walked through the arch. The space beyond exploded into brilliant light, so shocking and so unexpected that his ax clattered

to the metal floor and he covered his eyes with the backs of his hands, staggering back, nearly falling.

When he took his hands from his eyes and looked about him, he felt that he had gone mad. He stood in a room one hundred feet long and fifty feet wide. The ceiling was forty feet high. Side by side, in two parallel rows, with a wide aisle between them, were huge, coffinlike objects. To steady his reeling brain he counted them. Exactly thirty.

Up to the level of his eyes, they were intricate with odd dials, tubes, wiring, marked with symbols similar to those on the handles of the levers in the small room halfway to the top of the mountain. Above eye-level were the rounded, transparent tops.

And inside the bulbous tops were stretched the figures of men and women. But they were men and women such as he had never seen before. The fact that each was lying down made height difficult to estimate. It seemed that they were fifteen feet tall, each of them. Tall and blonde and dead. One of the coffinlike objects was empty, the hinged transparent lid flung back.

In superstitious fear he looked out into the darkness. Was one of these enormous creatures prowling the darkness, startled out of death by his coming?

It was then that he noticed the small lens set in the side of the arch and guessed that when he had entered the room, he had cut some sort of ray which had activated the brilliant lighting.

He listened. The vast place was as soundless as before. Growing bolder, he walked close to the nearest coffin, awed by the enormous size of the occupant. Men and women, they were naked to the waist, wore wide metal belts of intricate workmanship. From small slots in each belt protruded the handles of tools which were unlike anything he had ever seen before. To the belts were fastened a sort of skirt of fine metal mesh which came almost down to the knees. The men were bearded and, men and women alike, the tawny blonde hair was worn at shoulder-length.

There was no sign of pulse or breathing. He jumped back as he saw the faint quiver of a silver needle on one of the dials. It was a hall of the dead, with all the garish brilliance of a research laboratory.

Close to his eyes was the enormous hand of the woman behind the transparent sub-

stance. Each finger seemed almost as big around as his wrist. He turned and saw, on the far wall, to the left of the arch, a high board covered with large switches, with dials of varying sizes, with an array of different colored buttons, absurdly large.

Suddenly Gowan Mitchell laughed. It was a laugh close to the dangerous borderline of insanity. Of course! He was freezing to death on the summit of Shenadun and all this was the result of his tortured imagination. These levers and moving corridors and blonde giants! Absurd, of course. He told himself to die calmly, to force these images from his mind.

They were false. They could not exist. Giants under the earth? Nonsense! Worse. Childish nonsense! Fairy tales!

Still laughing, he ran to the huge board, began to yank levers at random, push buttons. The needles spun madly on the dials. Some of the levers and switches were out of his reach. He moved them with the point of his ice axe.

He turned from the board and looked back at the coffins. All of the lids, hinged like the thirtieth, had turned back. One of the men reached up and clutched his throat. A hoarse gasp filled the room. Gowan Mitchell covered back in terror. The man shifted, fell heavily to the metal floor. Others began to stir. With slow and painful effort, the blonde giant got to his knees, stood up by clutching the table he had just vacated. His eyes were wild, and he came toward the panel at a slow stumbling run.

Gowan Mitchell backed toward the arch, ready to flee into the darkness, but the giant ignored him. The giant began to move the levers and switches that Gowan Mitchell had touched. The transparent hoods closed again, quickly.

One reopened and, long minutes later, the woman who occupied it sat up quietly and calmly. She stood on the metal floor, walked over and, after exchanging slow rumbling words with the man at the panel, she began to help him. The next one who stood up was a man. He also began to help. Their voices were very low, and their language was strange, reminding Gowan Mitchell of the Hawaiian tongue.

EACH one moved as though very weak. At last there were twenty-nine blonde giants in the room. They seemed indifferent to Gowan Mitchell's presence. They greeted

each other and Gowan was reminded of friends meeting after a long absence.

Still he tried to tell himself that all of this was the product of his dying mind. At last he saw some of them looking at him, talking to each other. They smiled. A man started slowly toward him. He felt like a child among adults. With a gasp of fear, he turned to run into the huge outer room.

He took but one step, and then every muscle froze. He could not move. He could not change the direction of his gaze, but was forced to look out into the darkness. An enormous hand folded around his arm. It was then that he fainted. . . .

He was conscious of a low humming, a monotonous noise that was not unpleasant. He tried to turn his head, but it was rigidly fixed in one position. He tentatively moved one arm, the other. He opened his eyes.

Above him, enormous and unbelievable, was the face of one of the blonde women. He seemed to be on some sort of a table. She looked down at him and her lips curled in a smile and she said, in a rich contralto:

"Do not be afraid!"

"Where am I?" he asked.

"Our ears are accustomed to different sound cycles, Mitchell. I am speaking abnormally quickly and at a higher than usual pitch. You must speak in as deep tones as you can, and slowly. Later we will devise something to cure this difference between us. I believe you asked where you are. Wait until I free you and you can look around."

Her big hands touched something beside his head and the pressure began to lessen. Remembering her instructions, he asked, "How did you learn to speak my language?"

She smiled again. "From you, Mitchell. While you were sleeping. We know everything about you and your world. It has been very interesting. You have made much progress. We are grateful. All of us."

His head was free. He sat up with her help. He looked down and saw that his head had been fastened into an odd looking chamber, like a huge bowl with a slot to admit his neck. Coils of wire rimmed the edge. She saw the direction of his glance. "With that we learned everything from you. It has all been recorded."

"How?"

"Mitchell, you are not a man of science. We can only use the words which we found in your brain. It is useless to attempt to ex-

plain with the few scientific words you possess."

"Have I been unconscious long?"

"Three of your days and nights. Come, we will go to Garra. He is the commander. He wishes to thank you and to explain."

The floor was a good ten feet below the level of the bench. She saw his difficulty, put her huge hands around his upper arms and lifted him easily down. Her laugh beat against his ears like thunder. "You are like one of our children."

A few of the giants were gathered in the room in which he had first found them. He gasped as he saw the enormous outer room. It was now brilliantly lighted. It was a full mile long, at the minimum.

One of these people looked older than the others. He saw Gowan Mitchell, lifted one of the small tools from his belt and spoke into it. In a few seconds more of the blonde giants entered. Gowan Mitchell felt lost among the vista of huge muscled legs. The woman saw his difficulty, picked him up and stood him on one of the tables where they had slept. The faces of these huge beings were still a good four feet above Mitchell, but he felt more comfortable. In a voice much lower and slower than the voice of the woman, the giant known as Garra said:

"Mitchell, we owe much to you. You must understand. We are of the race of Famu from the planet Jorla. In deep space three thousand years ago our spaceship drive failed, and we made an emergency landing here on Earth. By the time repairs were effected, we found that our planet was at its maximum distance from Earth and we could not risk a trip. One thousand of your years had to pass before we could attempt it. We could not communicate with Jorla to tell of our distress. Our average life span is two hundred years. Our solution was to construct this place and induce artificial sleep of a sort which does not detract from the life span. Ten of us were selected by lot to serve as attendants to the others for periods of one hundred years each. At the end of one thousand years, Jorla would be close enough to attempt a return with our crippled ship.

"All went well until, by bad fortune, the third attendant grew careless and was killed by falling rock while constructing a subsidiary corridor. We have found his bones. They have turned to dust. Thus at the end of a thousand years, Jorla was near, but we

slept on. At the end of the second thousand years it was once again too distant. Three thousand years have passed. It is now close enough for us again to attempt a return. But for you, we would have slept on for many more thousands of years, perhaps forever. Even so, you nearly killed all of us with your handling of the controls. How did you find us?"

THE FAMOUS mountain climber took a deep breath before answering.

"I—I was trapped on top of the mountain. I dug down through the ice and found metal—a small round trap door. I pried it open. It shut behind me when I fell through."

"We already know that, of course, Mitchell. I wished to hear you say it."

"I do not understand the source of power. Everything is in working order."

"Here we are nearly a mile below your sea level, Mitchell. It is six of your miles to the summit of the mountain. The internal heat of the earth provides our power."

"How could you make anything as vast as this in so short a time?"

"You do not have the science to understand. In your terms, we used atomic power to melt away the solid rock, forming walls of vitrified rock at a temperature which gives it much the same specifications as a metal."

"But why are you buried in a mountain?"

"We did not wish to be disturbed, and the mountain, the hollow shaft up through the heart of the mountain, will aid our departure. When we first landed, we explored your world. They are a primitive people and superstitious. But you have advanced far while we slept."

Mitchell said: "There are legends—giants in the olden times. Blonde giants who walked the earth."

"I imagine those legends are based on our explorations. Your world is not pleasant for us. Jorla is smaller. Here we are slow, weak and awkward. We had expected to find creatures here much larger than ourselves."

"Why does the moving corridor go to the top of the mountain?"

"That is our place of observation and astronomical computation," Garra said. "We have been to the summit. Conditions are proper for a return. Our calculations are complete. We will leave in seven of your hours."

Gowan Mitchell looked around at the grave faces. They watched him silently. Garra spoke again.

"While searching your mind, we considered how best we could reward you for the service you have done us. It is within our power to return you to your world with great riches. But we know what will happen should we do that."

The gift of life! Gowan Mitchell's pulse thudded and his mouth grew dry. He frowned at the tone of Garra's words.

"What will happen?" he asked.

"We know your mind well, Mitchell. We know what motivates you. For the rest of your life you would look at the sky at night and curse yourself for having partaken of every splendid adventure but the last one—the ultimate one—the greatest adventure any man of your race has ever had."

"What do you mean?"

"We mean that the greatest thing we can do for you is to take you with us to the shining cities of Jorla across the wilderness of deepest space."

Gowan Mitchell felt the stir of his blood, a prickle of excitement along his spine.

In a hoarse voice, with a smile on his lips, he said, "Are there mountains on Jorla?"

"Mountains that rise eighty thousand feet from the level of our seas."

After it had been carefully explained to him, he learned the purpose of the huge rails he had seen. On them, sleek and majestic in its thousand feet of shining beauty, the incredible weight of a gigantic spaceship had been rolled to a takeoff position. In anticipation of his acceptance, a special compartment had been prepared for him, equipped to counteract the enormous shock of takeoff on his body.

They had explained to him how the nose of the ship fitted into the shining tube, the tube that extended straight up through the heart of Shenadun. With the initial blast of the atomic drive, the heat would liquefy all the apparatus left behind. The enormous pressure, confined by the flanks of the mighty mountain, would project the ship up the tube like a shell out of a gun, a gun pointed toward Jorla, untold millions of miles away. The compression of air in front of the ship would blow out the plug of metal and ice at the summit.

The woman who had taken him first to Garra, carried him up the ladder to the platform and from there through the door cut

into the side of the ship. She took him to his compartment, helped him fasten the straps, and closed the door after him. Six minutes to wait. Gowan Mitchell waited, his fingernails cutting into the palms of his hands, and his heart joyous. . . .

The following morning a radio announcer was speaking into a microphone. He was saying:

"Ladies and Gentlemen of the radio audience. This is Clinton Hoffman coming to you again through the courtesy of Stickfeed, the food that keeps your baby healthy. I now bring you a summary and analysis of the day's news.

"Last night there was a good deal of excitement in official circles, about the odd rocket that went up from somewhere in Asia. You remember that the common consensus of opinion was that the Russians were experimenting in Siberia with their version of the V-Two. The rocket itself was observed from Calcutta, Delhi, and the coastal cities of China. This goes to show you how millions of people can be wrong.

"Half an hour ago, your correspondent was talking by transoceanic telephone with Doctor Wallace Wington, a member of the Mitchell Expedition to Mount Shenadun in the Himalayas. Both Gowan Mitchell and Joseph Carmon were lost in the last assault on the summit. The other members of the expedition are hunting for their bodies. Dr. Wington flew out to Calcutta with an eyewitness report of the so-called rocket.

"Dr. Wington told me that there was an enormous rumble from the depths of Shenadun and the earth shook. A spear of flame shot miles into the air. At the end of it some sort of a blazing ball was shot up toward the stratosphere.

"In the morning Dr. Wington examined the summit with powerful glasses and he has seen a newly created crater up there. Thus the official apprehension concerning a super-powered rocket is false. Dr. Wington explained that Shenadun, probably a long-silent volcano, built up enough pressure to erupt. The matter thrown toward the sky doubtless fell in some remote portion of the Himalayas.

"So friends, you can call it sort of a volcanic burp, hardly worth all the thousands of words that have so far been devoted to it.

"Today in the House of Representatives, a bill was introduced which makes it possible for"