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# Ten Million Years Ahead

By EDMOND HAMILTON

*A startling story of what this world will be like ten million years from now  
when plants rule instead of men*

"I MEAN just that," said Norton quietly. "Ten million years."

Fairley and I stared unbelievably at our friend. We three sat in the long, roughly furnished living-room of an old farmhouse, lit by shaded electrics. The only sound for a moment was that of the night breeze outside sighing through the branches of the trees. It was Fairley who at last broke the silence.

"Ten million years!" he repeated. "Norton, you can't be serious!"

"I was never more serious in my life," Norton quietly affirmed.

"But it's crazy—impossible!" I burst out. "All these theories about time are all right, but to try to put them into practise——"

"Only an insane man would think of it," Fairley finished for me. "Norton, you've not been working up here on a thing like that?"

"On just that," Norton replied. "And before you and Olcott get so positive about it, let me tell you what I've done.

"You both know how interested I became back at the university in the subject of time. It was the one thing in physical science that fascinated me. I spent most of my spare hours working out the theories and repeating the observations of De Sitter and Einstein and the rest, and when I left the university four years ago I determined that I, Harris Norton, was going to know more about time than any one else on earth.

"So I came up to this old Connecticut farmhouse I'd inherited and had it fixed over with workshop and living-quarters. In the four years since then I've lived

alone here and I've worked like—well, I've worked. In that workshop there I've carried out experiments that would have blasted half the fabric of accepted science if I'd made them public. And I've come at last to know, as I planned, more about time than any one else.

"Time is a dimension, just as length and breadth and thickness are dimensions. That is a commonplace of physical science, nowadays. We know that matter moves along this time-dimension from the past toward the future at an unchangeable speed, like a locomotive following its track. We can not speed up our movement on that track, or reverse it, or stop or even slow it, but move forward always at the same rate.

"But suppose that this time-track we follow doubled back upon itself so that a point really far ahead of us on it would be close beside us in reality, just as a railway track or road sometimes doubles back upon itself so that a point which you will not reach on it for hours is right beside you? Then we could short-cut across to that point and reach a time actually millions of years ahead in the future!

"I saw this and determined to find a way to double the time-dimension back on itself to permit that short-cut into the future. Dimensions can be altered by force, you know—Einstein's space-frames and the Fitzgerald contraction show that. And after two years of research I found a combination of magnetic and electrical forces capable of bending the time-dimension back in that way, of doubling time back upon itself!

"To utilize that force I built what I've



*"From both sides they rushed upon us with incredible swiftness."*

called a time-doubler, a tub-like half-cylinder that holds inside it the mechanism that produces the time-bending force, and that has room for two or three occupants. By turning on that force the time-dimension along which the doubler moves is bent back upon itself, and the doubler, if set for a time ten million years ahead, is shot into that time, its force affecting only itself and occupants. By reversing the force the doubler and those in it can return to this time.

"Less than a week ago I finished the time-doubler and gave it its tests. I resolved to cross in it to a time ten million years ahead, but then, with all preparations finished, knew that I could not go alone. I remembered you two, Fairley and Olcott, always keen for adventure, and so had you come here to put it up

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to you. The time-doubler is ready in the workshop, and in it within the hour I'm starting, and want you to start with me, to a time ten million years in the future!"

**W** E TWO had listened to Norton with tense interest, and when he paused Fairley asked a quick question.

"But granting that the thing is possible, Norton, why go so far in time—why take such a tremendous jump into the future as that?"

"Can you ask why? Man, have you no desire to know what this world and man are going to be like in ten million years? Think of the changes and progress of the last hundred years, the last thousand years. What colossal changes will there not be in the next ten million years, then? What colossal heights and

powers may humanity not have reached?"

"Lord!" breathed Fairley. "I see now—it *is* an adventure."

"And we're going!" I exclaimed. "Of course we're going!"

Fairley and I followed Morton through the door into the large workroom that took up the remainder of the old house's ground-floor. It had been formed, evidently, by the throwing together of a number of smaller rooms, and presented an odd, white-lit scene. Great pieces of apparatus, Tesla coils and super-sensitive ammeter-boards and gleaming electronic-radiation instruments were ranged neatly along its walls.

We two had eyes only for the object at the room's end. That was a tub-like thing of polished metal ten feet across and four in height. Half its interior was occupied by a bulging black metal case that shielded mechanisms half-glimpsed through perforations in the case. On its top were a half-dozen black plugs with twice as many openings about them.

"The time-doubler," Norton said quietly.

"And that thing can actually take us across ten million years of time?" Fairley asked, half incredulously.

"Just that. When the mechanisms in that case operate they produce the force that bends the time-dimension back upon itself, shifting the time-doubler and all in it across the gap to a point ten million years in the future. We won't change position in space at all, of course, but will find ourselves in this same spot as it will be ten million years from now."

"It's beyond belief," I said, staring.

Norton smiled. "I think that you'll believe soon," he commented.

Before we two were conscious of the nearness of our start, Norton was quickly directing preparations. He had us bring from our suitcases the rough clothing and

pistols we had brought at his request. As we donned these, struggling against the incredulity that lingered still in our minds, Norton was loading into the time-doubler an assortment of compact equipment we might need.

He climbed in after these and lifted the case from the central mechanism, inspecting for a last time its myriad intricate coils and radiation-plates. When he replaced the case he shifted two of the plugs on its top to other openings, and at once a purring came from the mechanism. Norton shifted another plug and the purring sank to an almost inaudible whisper of soft sound. He looked up then at us, smiling whimsically.

Fairley and I climbed carefully into the thing, seating ourselves beside him on the time-doubler's bottom. My pulse was racing with excitement despite myself, yet I expected at least some moments of delay before our start. But Norton acted with a startling abruptness as soon as we were beside him. His fingers snapped out and shifted another plug and instantly the low purring sound became for a second thunderous and deafening, and black unconsciousness crashed upon me.

**O**UT of the black depths of unconsciousness I rose with the sensation of hands upon my face and excited voices in my ears. I was aware in a moment that they were the voices of Norton and Fairley, and as I opened my eyes I saw that I was lying in the time-doubler's bottom with the other two bending excitedly over me.

"We've done it!" Norton was crying. "Olcott, we've done it!"

"What—you don't mean——" I stammered, and then as I staggered to my feet was silent, thunderstruck.

For the time-doubler in which we were stood no longer in the white-lit, apparatus-filled workroom. It stood in strange,

thin sunlight, tilted a little awry, upon a thick bed of what seemed gray-green moss. This was at the bottom of a small depression or gully, and on its sides there were thick growths of great looming lichens, the same gray-green in color. It seemed the vegetation of another world, the soft moss and great lichen-like growths, even though we at the depression's bottom could see only its interior.

I noted dazedly too that the sun seemed rather of deep orange in color than the familiar golden yellow, and that its light was thinner and its apparent size much smaller. Also its heat, though falling full upon us, was far less than might have been expected, the sun's position showing that it was midafternoon.

"We've done it!" Norton was still exclaiming. "We've crossed ten million years of time!"

"But the sun—these growths——" I attempted.

"Just what we might have expected," Norton said. "Every sun as it grows older changes from yellow toward red in color, and shrinks in size. And these lichen-growths around us only show that in this vast stretch of time the plant-life of earth has changed completely and evolved into wholly new forms."

"But let's get up out of this!" Fairley exclaimed. "We can see nothing down here."

"The doubler——" I began doubtfully, but he shook his head impatiently.

"It will be safe enough—we're not going far from it."

Norton nodded, as eager as we to extend our view; so with a glance at the weapons in our belts we turned from the time-doubler and began climbing up the steep slope of the gully toward its crest. The soft moss slipped and gave beneath our feet, but in a moment we had reached the slope's top and stood gazing in wonder about us.

It was a great lichen-forest that stretched about us. The big gray-green growths crowded us in on every side. Branchless and leafless, they were themselves like erect masses of moss, ten feet or more in height. There moved among them no birds or small animals, nor did we see even insects. It was the landscape of another planet—the silent forest of grotesque growths stretching as far about us as the eye could reach.

We began to thread our way between the looming things, heading in a general easterly direction. We were all three keyed to a high pitch of suspense—the excitement I felt reflected from the faces of Norton and Fairley. What were we to find in this strange world that earth had become during the ten million slow years we had crossed in a flash? What mighty works and cities of man might not lie near to us, the product of countless cumulated centuries of man's progress?

The silence, though, began to tell upon my nerves as we went on. Even our footsteps were deadened by the soft, cushion-like moss that covered the lichened forest's floor. So complete was the silence that it was a shock to our senses, accustomed to the innumerable small noises of everyday life. The harshest of sounds would have been welcome.

I was about to speak to Norton for no other reason than to break the stillness, when he abruptly halted and listened.

There came again the sound that had at that moment reached our ears, a distant thumping as of something striking the earth with great force. It repeated, multiplied, thump following thump swiftly and seeming to become quickly louder. We looked at each other, startled and wondering. The thumping was so loud by then that a sudden sensation of fear invaded me.

"Whatever it is, it's coming closer!"

I exclaimed. "We'd best get out of here until we know what it is."

Norton nodded swiftly. "Yes—back to the time-doubler!" he ordered.

We turned, were running back, when Fairley after a few steps glanced back over his shoulder and then halted, pointing wildly.

"There they are!" he cried. "My God, what are they?"

We were all frozen for the moment by our amazement as we looked back with him. The thumping in that moment had become terribly loud, the ground seeming to vibrate beneath it through all the forest, and now we saw its source.

Five giant shapes were striding through the lichen-growths not a half-mile behind us! They were perhaps forty feet in height, huge white metal things coming almost in our direction! Each of the things consisted of four huge jointed limbs or legs of metal which met at their upper end to support a metal cup or bowl.

The things strode forward as a four-footed animal does, moving two of the great metal legs at a time. Each great step thus brought them almost a score of feet forward, the metal limbs crashing through lichens and moss and striking the ground to cause the thumping that was loud in our ears. And up in the cup of each of the incredible things we glimpsed something green and moving!

"They're machines—stalking-machines of some kind!" Norton exclaimed. "But they can't have seen us yet—they——"

"They *have* seen us!" Fairley cried. "Look—they're after us!"

The five great stalking-machines had, in the second before, changed their direction suddenly and with thundering strides were coming with abruptly increased speed straight after us!

"The time-doubler!" Norton cried again. "Get back to it and out of here!"

**R**UNNING with all possible speed between the lichens, we headed back toward the gully in which we had left the time-doubler. But I knew with sickening sureness as we ran on in the next seconds that we could not evade those giant shapes whose vast limbs were crashing closer each moment behind us.

I suppose that that nightmare flight of ours through the lichen-forest lasted for moments only, though seeming then like hours. It ended abruptly. Norton, who was running more than a dozen feet behind Fairley and myself, tripped suddenly in the soft moss and sprawled headlong. I cried to Fairley as I glimpsed it and we half-halted to turn back toward him but were stayed by his shout.

"No—go on—go on!" he cried. "They've got me——!"

For even in that second, as he struggled to regain his feet, the foremost of the giant metal shapes was almost upon him. From its cup dangled great many-jointed metal arms that were reaching down toward our friend.

I had a lightning glimpse of Norton grasped by the great arms and raised aloft, at the same moment that Fairley jerked me sidewise and into a thick clump of the lichen-growths beside us. He pulled me to the ground with him, the two of us crouching deep into the sheltering growths.

"They'll have us if we run from them—we can't make the time-doubler now!" Fairley was whispering rapidly in my ear. "Our only chance is to hide from them."

"But Norton——" I protested.

"We can't help him now," he answered. "And they're not harming him—look!"

We could glimpse through the masses of growths that sheltered us the scene some distance back in the lichens.

The stalking-machine that had gripped

Norton in its great arms had raised him high in the air to deposit him in the great cup at the mechanism's top. We could see green shapes moving in that cup around Norton as he was deposited among them, and then he vanished from our view inside it.

The other stalking-machines had for the moment gathered around that one, apparently forgetting us two in the interest of Norton's capture. But abruptly they or their green occupants seemed to remember our own existence and came forward with huge, crashing strides after us. We crouched lower, and scarce dared to breathe when the five towering metal shapes halted almost beside the thick clump of lichens in which we lay.

They seemed scanning the forest for us, as though puzzled by our sudden disappearance. From where we lay all that Fairley and I could see of the machines then were some of their great limbs, huge white metal columns sunk deep into the moss and earth with every step. These mighty legs began in a moment to lift and crash down again all around us, as the stalking-machines commenced apparently to beat the growths in search of us.

We could hear the thumping crash of their steps as they moved ponderously and deliberately all about us. Crouching with Fairley in the thickest portion of the clump, I felt all the nightmare unreality of the situation. We could hear the great jointed arms thrashing through the growths and knew that we were being hunted as boys might hunt some hiding, timid animals. And less than an hour before we had been back in Norton's laboratory! Less than an hour in one sense—but ten million years, in another.

I gasped involuntarily as a huge limb crashed down into the growths not a yard from us. It seemed that the pounding of my pulse must be audible to whatever creatures were in the cup of the

stalking-machine that stood over us. And when a big metal arm swept through the lichens in which we crouched, I restrained myself from crying out only by clenching my fists tightly. The arm's end, a great claw-like thing of metal, moved this way and that about us and in its searchings actually passed between Fairley and me. Rigid with fear, we could not relax until seconds after it had withdrawn.

The stalking-machine over us moved on with crashing steps to search other clumps, and we breathed a little more easily. Venturing to peer forth again from our crushed sheltering growths, we saw the five great shapes moving still in search of us through the unearthly forest. Once or twice we saw their great jointed limbs bending as they stooped down, as though to examine something on the ground.

One stooped close beside the growths in which we hid, and as we had thus a close view of the machine's cup and its occupants we uttered low exclamations, amazement making us forget our peril.

"In the cup!" I whispered. "God, Fairley—you see them?"

"Plants!" he muttered, stunned. "It can't be—we're insane, man, such a thing can't be!"

The thing that we were looking upon was, in fact, well-nigh unbelievable. We had glimpsed the occupants of the stalking-machines before only as green moving shapes high above us. With the unconscious anthropomorphism that is so strong in all men, we had assumed, I think, that these were green-clad or green-skinned men or man-like creatures. Only men could have built and operated such mechanisms, experience assured us. But now we could see that the green things had not the remotest resemblance to men or even to animals of any kind, but were plants, great green plants that

were occupying and intelligently operating the huge stalking-machines!

The cup of each of the big machines was, we saw, filled with what seemed smooth black soil, though I am inclined now to believe that it was not in fact soil but a special combination of chemical elements. And in this, in each machine's cup, were rooted three or four great plants. I had never seen plants like them. There was a central dark-green trunk or core, about four feet high, from the base of which sprang up a number of flat, strong arms or tendrils, of lighter green.

But what was most amazing was that these arms moved this way and that, consciously and deliberately, over the controls of the stalking-machine, directing it on its search for us in the lichens! The plants rooted there in the black soil of the machine's cup were the great mechanism's operators, and though they could have no more sense of sight or even hearing than any other plant, they were searching by some strange sense of their own that had told them we were near! They were plants, nothing else, but were *intelligent* plants, sentient plants who in their machines were hunting us as men might hunt rabbits!

**T**HE stalking-machine that had stooped near us to give us that amazing glimpse now straightened and moved on. It left us transfixed, our peril almost forgotten in our stunned astonishment.

"Plants!" Fairley was repeating dazedly beside me. "And the damned things are alive—intelligent—searching for us! What kind of a hell has earth become in these last ten million years, to have spawned things like that?"

"God knows," I whispered. "Plants operating machines—it can't be real!"

"Whatever they are, they've got Norton," he said. "And if they——"

"Look! They've given up the search—they're going, Fairley!"

The five towering stalking-machines had gathered together as though at a command, and were moving off with their great crashing steps toward the west, having evidently given up hope of finding us. We ran out from our lichen shelter. The five shapes were already almost out of sight of us, so quickly did they stride through the lichen forest. We saw the moving green arms of the plants in their cups, and I seemed to glimpse in the cup of one, too, a dark form that was Norton, unmoving. Then they were out of sight, hidden from us by the big growths around us, the thumping crash of their steps diminishing and dying away.

I wondered when I turned toward Fairley whether my face was as pale and strange as his own.

The lichen forest about us was as silent now as before, the thin orange light of the westering sun slanting over its great gray-green expanse.

Fairley was speaking rapidly. "We can't go back without Norton. We've got to find him, alive or dead, before we return to the time-doubler."

"I don't think they'll kill him, at least immediately," I said slowly. "Those plants—they had a good enough chance to do that when they took him, if they had wanted."

He laughed mirthlessly. "Did we ever dream, Olcott, that we would be running from plants—hiding from plants? Are we ten million years in the future or are we in nightmare?"

"It's not wholly incomprehensible, even so, Fairley," I said. "After all, if man evolved to intelligence and power from the animal races, why should not one of the plant races have evolved to as great or greater intelligence in these thousands of centuries?"



"It may be so—it may be so," he answered. "There's a horror to the thing that sickens me, though. To cross time into the future—it wasn't meant, Olcott, I see now. We've got to get back."

"But first—Norton," I said, and he nodded, gazed westward with me. "We'll find him," he told me. "They left trail enough for us to follow."

Westward from us, in fact, there extended a great path crushed through the thick lichen-growths of the forest by the passage of the five stalking-machines. We set out along this path, first examining the pistols whose existence we had forgotten, perhaps luckily for ourselves, until then. The stillness of the strange forest was again oppressive as we moved on, our footsteps muffled as before by the crushed lichens and mosses on which we trod.

Fairley's face was as strange and set as I knew my own must be, and we moved without conversation. I do not think that in either of our heads was there any clear idea of what we might do. We knew only that somewhere ahead the plants were moving on in their stalking-machines with Norton, and that we were following our friend.

**I** SUPPOSE that we had gone a half-mile through the lichen forest along that broad crushed path when I became gradually aware that we were being trailed by some creature or creatures. From the tail of my eye I had glimpsed in the last minutes a vague shape or shapes slipping through the lichens beside the path we followed.

In moments more I was sure that I was right. I whispered the news to Fairley, and showing no suspicion we walked steadily on, but alert now and with hands upon our pistols. We could clearly discern shapes moving in the surrounding lichens by then, though too vaguely to

make out what manner of creatures they were. The sight of them, though, was enough to key our already taut nerves up to the breaking-point of tension, and I think that in a moment more we would have dashed into the lichens to confront our stalkers rather than endure such tension longer.

But at that moment there was a blood-curdling *whispering* cry, and a dozen men leaped from the surrounding lichens toward us.

They were photographed on my brain in the instant that they sprang, Fairley and I jerking our pistols forth. They were men of short stature whose skins and even whose hair was of an unnaturally bleached white. Their only clothing was a short tunic with breast-straps of woven moss, and each carried either a short metal-pointed spear or a curving blade of hammered metal much like a simitar. From both sides they rushed on us, with incredible swiftness, and before I had my own pistol half raised toward them it had been knocked from my grasp by the impact of their rush and I was struggling among them.

There was no further fight on my part—I was simply overwhelmed and borne to the ground. I heard a choking cry from Fairley and saw him overpowered also before he could fire a shot.

Instantly the white savages raised us from the ground, and with two of their number carrying each of us began moving rapidly into the lichens of the forest. They carried on a *whispering* conversation as they went along, their voices so low as to be almost inaudible, and I thought that many of their words that I heard were familiar to my ears, words out of my own and a half-dozen other languages, but distorted and changed in pronunciation. Any chance we might have had to try speaking with them was obviated by the fact that those who car-

ried us kept a hand tightly across our mouths to prevent all possible outcry.

I could observe them more closely as we were borne along, though, and saw that despite their unnatural whiteness of skin and hair, many of them had intelligent-looking faces.

A very patent fear was painted on them now, though, and they kept glancing about and backward constantly as they moved through the towering lichens. Once, when we came to what I knew was the crushed track of another of the great stalking-machines, they halted completely and did not go forward until one of their number had reconnoitered for some minutes. It was very evident that they knew of the existence of the intelligent plants and their huge striding mechanisms, and were in mortal fear of meeting them.

At last they halted with us beside a great clump of lichens, and after cautiously looking about, moved into the clump's depths. A round hole about a yard across yawned in the earth there and into this the foremost of the white savages crawled, head foremost.

We saw them disappear down the hole and then they motioned for us to do likewise, releasing us but menacing us with the spears and blades. The dark burrow-like opening was singularly uninviting but there was no choice, and gingerly I crawled down into it, Fairley following. I found that it widened out into a fairly large cavity inside, however, though completely dark. Our captors, whose eyes were evidently more attuned to this darkness than ours, grasped us and hurried us into a low tunnel as dark, but in which we could walk by bending almost double.

As we moved through this dark tunnel their voices rose from whispering to a more normal tone, and they took no precautions to keep us silent longer. Fairley's voice came from the darkness be-

hind me, the first time I had heard it since the attack and capture.

"Olcott, you're all right?" he asked. "Do you think we could make a break for it now—fight back up?"

"Are there many of them behind you?" I asked in return.

"A half-dozen, I suppose," he answered.

"Too many," I told him. "They can see better than we in this darkness and know their way—they'd have us in a moment with those spears."

"Look!" he said suddenly. "Light ahead."

I had seen it at the same moment. It was a circle of pale, misty light so feeble as hardly to deserve the name, that marked the end of the tunnel we followed. In a moment, with our captors around us, we emerged from the tunnel into a quite large cavern hollowed from the earth, and illuminated by that feeble bluish glow of light. The first thing I saw was that the light had its source from great phosphorescent lichens growing from the cavern's earth walls. I was later to learn that they were selected and planted there for that purpose, forming the only illumination of these burrows beneath earth's surface.

This cavity or burrow held more than a hundred white-skinned and white-haired men and women and children like our captors. Most of them occupied the large cavern itself, but there were others in smaller holes or cavities in its walls, the latter being evidently for the accommodation of separate families.

There was no fire in all the cave, nor indeed would fire have been possible without danger of suffocation by smoke. Many of the people in it were eating chunks of thick white pulpy stuff that I recognized as broken from lichen-stems. Some prepared these by rolling and kneading it upon rocks, and there were

some rude vessels of hammered metal used to transport and hold water from a trickle that gurgled from the great cavern's wall.

We stared across this blue-lit cavern in amazement, its occupants approaching and thronging about us with a fearful curiosity.

"And *this* is the height mankind has reached after ten million years!" Fairley exclaimed. "This is the colossal civilization we came across time to see!"

I was as stupefied as he. "Good God! To have been bleached white like this, they must have lived down in these dim burrows for generations!"

"Plants stalking the earth in great machines and men hiding from them in burrows as the beasts once hid from men! Olcott, are we dreaming it?"

**O**UR captors, pushing out of the way the curious throng that crowded about us, conducted us to one of the smaller cavities hollowed in the main cavern's side. Lit by the feeble blue glow of a few of the phosphorescent lichens, it held a half-dozen seated men who surveyed us with astonishment as our guards made quick explanations to them of our capture.

Our captors seemed to address themselves to a single one of the half-dozen, a man much older than the others, with that stamped upon his wrinkled face and in his steady eyes that marked him as a ruler. As he listened he was surveying us closely, and when the explanations were finished he commented to the others in his deep voice. I was surprised to find that we could understand to some extent what he was saying.

His speech, like that of the others, was in fact our own language, changed and distorted by the tremendous stretch of time across which we had come. It held many words and phrases quite unknown

to us, but was understandable, and in what follows I give rather the sense of what we gathered from their speech than the mixture of known and unknown words that these people actually employed.

"Surely these two are from no burrow known to me," he was saying. "I have visited many burrows in my time, even beyond the lichen-forest, but never saw men such as these, dark of hair and strange of dress."

"It may be that they are not men at all, O Gerkel," suggested one beside him.

"Aye, men do not walk in open sunlight as these were walking when our hunters captured them," said a third. "Only the great plants and those who serve them dare do that."

"Yet these are not of the great plants but are men," a clean-featured younger man pointed out. "It may be that they are from some distant burrow where men are different from us."

Gerkel nodded. "You say true, Blan—they are men. Yet even so they may be spies of the plants—such a thing has been known before."

Until then we had listened, but now Fairley, with a glance at me, spoke to them, slowly and clearly.

"We are men indeed, O Gerkel," he told the older man, "but we are not from any burrow, neither are we spies of the great plants. We did not know until today that either the plants or your people existed. We came with another from a time ages on ages in the past, and that other was captured by the plants in great machines. We, following to find and rescue him, were captured in turn by your hunters and brought here."

The men before us had followed Fairley's words intently. Gerkel was the first to speak.

"That is a strange tale—that you come from far in the past. Were you like us I would say that you lie, yet it is true that

there have not been for ages men dark of hair and brown of skin as yourselves."

"It is the truth," Fairley said. "Hidden in the lichens above is the machine in which we came."

There was a whisper of wonder among the others. "They must be speaking truth, indeed," Blan said, "for had they been men like ourselves they would have had too great a fear of the plants to walk in the open as they did."

"Is it true," Gerkel asked, "that in the far past men ruled earth as now the plants do? I have heard the legends that they still tell of how, before the great plants rose and mastered the faces of men, there were no burrows at all and men lived upon earth's surface in day and night without fear."

"It is true," I answered. "We come ourselves from that time and are amazed to find men hiding thus and fleeing from plants."

Gerkel shook his head sadly. "You know our world not," he said. "The great plants are mighty and they are merciless. Hide from them as we do in our burrows, their great stalking-machines watch for us ever in the lichen-forests and capture all they find to take to their plant-cities for slaves. If they have taken your friend, abandon hope for him, for no man ever escapes the cities of the plants. You are free to go, for I see that you are really men; yet if you are wise you will remain in this burrow, where alone you will not need to fear the plants."

"No, if our friend lives we will find him," I answered, "Whether in a plant-city or not, we are going after him."

"And I will go with you!" Blan exclaimed excitedly. "For weeks has Julla, my brother, been a slave in the plant-city to the west, and what you can risk for your friend, surely can I for him!"

The others cried out. "Are you mad, Blan?" Gerkel asked. "None in all our

race has ever dared approach the cities of the plants!"

"Yet if these strangers can dare it, I can!" Blan answered. "There is one way by which we three can enter the plant-city, I think, and that is as slaves. You must change that strange dress of yours for tunics of moss like mine, and we must carry our metal blades with us as weapons. Once inside, we should be able to find among the slaves my brother and your friend."

"It's a chance, Olcott!" Fairley exclaimed. "We'll have to leave our clothes and pistols here, but the latter would be useless against the plants anyway, I think."

Swiftly, with those about us still stunned by Blan's plan, we changed into the woven moss tunics he brought us, receiving with them the simitar-like metal blades that would be our only weapons. Blan then crumbled a porous lichen-stem into a white powder that he rubbed quickly through our hair, giving it the same bleached white appearance as that of the others. Fairley and I hardly recognized each other when he had finished.

Ready then to go, we paused with Blan. I shall not soon forget the picture of that scene—the blue-lit cavity with the white-haired and white-faced men about us, most of them silent in their awe of what we were undertaking. I suppose that they looked upon us as bent upon sheer suicide in even daring approach one of the cities of the dreaded plants.

Gerkel clasped our hands, a gesture that had survived a hundred thousand centuries.

"I know that none of you will come back ever," he said, "that you go to death or slavery. Yet, I do not know why, I am glad to have lived to see this—to see men going forth and holding the power of the great plants as nothing."

Blan and Fairley and I turned then and

emerged from the smaller cavity into the large main cavern or burrow. The men and women in it watched us in awe as we crossed it toward the dark mouth of the tunnel leading upward. Some of the men called farewells to Blan as though to one on the point of death.

**B**LAN led the way surely up through the darkness of the tunnel, Fairley and I linking hands with him as we half walked, half crawled after him in it. We reached the tunnel's mouth, and after Blan had peered cautiously forth for a full five minutes we pulled ourselves up into the growth of lichens that masked the shaft's entrance.

The small orange sun was sinking rapidly now toward the western horizon. Fairley and I stood for a moment, breathing great lungfuls of the open air, feeling an inexpressible relief at being in sunlight and open air once more after the dim burrows and tunnels beneath. Blan, though, seemed to feel only a marked increase in caution upon emerging, his eyes darting this way and that keenly in search of danger.

He laid a finger significantly upon his lips and then pointed westward, starting in that direction. Fairley and I followed him closely, and in a few minutes saw that he was keeping always as much as possible within the screening shelter of the lichen-growths, skirting each patch of open ground as though it represented a deadly peril. The degree of his caution showed me more than anything else the depths of fear in which the monstrous plants kept these men of the future.

The sinking sun was in our faces as we moved on, a small disk of orange-red fire that the passing ages had dimmed enough to make it possible for one almost to stare into it. I strove to get my bearings again as we went on, placing the direction of

the gully that held the time-doubler as well as possible.

Like three white shadows we slipped silently westward through the lichen-forest. Once Blan relaxed his cautious glances enough to point into a clump of great growths we were passing, whispering something I could not catch. I saw in the clump, though, a round tunnel-opening like that of the burrow from which we had come, and wondered how far beneath the ground we trod, in what dim-lit cavern, other white-haired and white-faced men were living. Yes, and in how many such burrows beneath the great forest, and maybe beneath all earth's surface, were men and women being born and living out their lives and dying? Descendants of those who had been earth's lords living now beneath the shadow of earth's new lords, the plants!

The thought, though it shook me, passed, for Blan's carefulness was by then increasing so much as to make it evident we were nearing our goal. We could see nothing unusual, the gray-green sea of the vast lichen-forest stretching about us endlessly, but in a moment I could see that somewhere not far ahead the ground sloped downward sharply. We went more slowly, at Blan's warning whisper, and at last crouched beneath a small lichen thicket on the crest, gazing downward.

From where we were the ground sloped downward, bare save for its moss carpet, into a great moss-covered sunken bowl or valley. This circular valley, in which were no lichen-growths at all, may have been three miles across, its level floor a few hundred yards down the slope from us. It was lit by the orange sun just touching the opposite horizon or crest, and in this natural great bowl was the city of plants we sought, a city without buildings.

Fairley and I stared, with Blan as fascinated as ourselves. I think that for the moment we two had forgotten Norton

entirely in the sheer amazement of what we saw.

The city was round, enclosed by a thick wall of white metal two-score feet in height. Just inside that wall was a circular row of deep square pits whose purpose in that first glance was not clear to us. Inside this circle of pits were circular rows of great gleaming machines very strange in appearance. They stood in the open air upon the smooth black soil that formed the city's floor. Some of them were apparently giant mixing-machines, that used paddle-like arms to crush up masses of various lichens and mosses with other materials in sunken tanks. Others turned forth linked lengths or great bars of the shining white metal. Still others were too vague for our eyes to distinguish.

But the most astounding feature was that before each of these machines was rooted in the ground one of the great green plants, operating and controlling its machine with its tendril-arms.

The sight was incredible—this city of plants in which plants worked steadily and intelligently, rooted as they were. I could see many of the huge stalking-machines coming and going across this unearthly plant-metropolis, each with plants rooted in the soil of their cups, directing the stalking-machines as we had seen them in the forest, carrying enormous burdens back and forth with them. The plants in the stalking-machines were the only ones that moved, however, all the others in the city being rooted in the ground by whatever machine or spot that held their particular task.

I saw beyond the rows of machines, toward the amazing city's center, rows of smaller plants that had apparently no work assigned them, growing in great beds and awaiting their full stature before taking up their part of the city's life. Stalking-machines were transplanted

ing some of the larger of them even as we watched, placing them by whatever machine or task had been assigned them. And in beyond even these I glimpsed at the city's far center a circle of unusually large plants at the center of which grew one positively huge. The plant-ruler of this weird plant-city, growing at its center and ruling it by whatever strange senses they used for sight and speech!

And, last and most terrible feature of all, there moved through the plant-city hundreds — yes, thousands — of human slaves, white-haired men and women like Blan beside me! Beneath the silent commands of the plants, expressed to them telepathically, they labored in this city of their masters. Many of them were occupied in feeding materials into the machines the plants controlled. Others were engaged in tending the beds of young plants, changing the soil about them and turning on them fine sprays. Still others aided plants in assembling metal sections into new machines. And, one sickened with horror to see, it was the plants who worked by far the most swiftly and intelligently with their tendril-arms, the humans seeming clumsy and dull and brute-like in comparison with them!

"Good God!" It was Fairley's exclamation, shaken with horror. "That you and I should look on such a sight, Olcott — plant masters and human slaves!"

"Norton!" I whispered. "Norton's down there somewhere, Fairley—is one of those slaves."

It steadied him. "Norton, in that hell!" he whispered. "But we'll have him out—how do you plan to enter the city, Blan?"

Blan pointed downward. "See—that gate."

**I**N THE city's metal wall, almost directly down the slope from us, was a gate or opening a dozen feet in width. On either

side of this opening was rooted a great plant, and the two of them, with their tendril-arms moving slowly and restlessly, had all the appearance of sentinels or guards.

"That is the gate we must go through," Blan was saying. "When darkness comes all the slaves inside the city, except a few left free to care for the beds of small plants in the night, will be herded into those square pits for the night. And soon after night's coming almost all the plants in the city will be sleeping."

"Sleeping?" interrupted Fairley incredulously, and Blan nodded.

"Yes, the plants sleep even as men do at night."

"Of course!" I exclaimed. "Don't you remember, Fairley, the botanist back in our own time who tested plants and found they went into torpor or sleep by night?"

"All the city's plants will be sleeping," Blan continued, "save those who guard the city at night, these being the plants rooted at its gates and other plants who watch over the city in stalking-machines and do not sleep. We will steal down through the darkness to that gate you see and will try with our blades to slay the two plants guarding it before they are aware of our presence and can flash a telepathic alarm to those in the stalking-machines.

"If we can slay them thus and get inside the city we can search the pits of the slaves for my brother and your friend, and if we find Julla and your Norton, can escape back out again, before the alarm is raised. Since we resemble slaves ourselves we will be less noticeable in the city if seen, since some, as I said, work throughout the night; yet even though they think us slaves, the plants would slay us if they caught us near the pits. It is the only plan that has any chance of success; and if it fails we had better die at

once, since otherwise we will remain as slaves of the plants while we live."

"In other words, it's a case of do or die," said Fairley, and Blan grinned, a very human grin.

"With the chances strongly on dying," he added.

By then the sun was sinking behind the opposite crest of the bowl-like valley that held the plant-city, and as dusk settled upon it its activities began to lessen. We saw the plants in the city turning off the great machines they controlled. Many of the plants operating stalking-machines brought these to rest for the night by allowing their great limbs to fold under them so that they rested with cups but a little above the ground.

A half-hundred of the many stalking-machines still remained active, however, engaged in herding the masses of white slaves from the work that had been theirs during the day toward the ring of square pits that held them by night. The giant white metal machines, the plants directing them almost invisible, were like men herding sheep as they pressed the men and women slaves toward the pits.

Metal flexible ladders like rope-ladders were unreeled into the pits and the slaves descended these like docile beasts, the ladders being drawn up again when all were in the pits. Containers of what was evidently food of some kind were lowered then into the pits by the stalking-machines.

The dusk was thickening rapidly and we could see that now the city's plants, except those at the gate and those in the guarding stalking-machines, were sinking into sleep, their tendril-arms folding up around their central trunks. Complete darkness was almost upon us, relieved by the white glimmer of starlight. By it we could see that all the plant-city was sleeping indeed. The plants rooted beside their machines, those rooted in the cups of the

resting stalking-machines, the beds of smaller plants nearer the city's center, and no doubt even that huge plant-king we had glimpsed at the city's heart—all these slept with tendrils shut, and there slept too now the masses of their human slaves in the ring of pits.

The only sound was of the great strides of the guarding stalking-machines moving to and fro in the city. Yet Blan restrained us still.

We crouched silently, gazing down toward the weird city that was clear now to our eyes in the white light of the stars. I looked up toward those stars. They blazed in the moonless night with a splendor new to me. All of the constellations known to me were gone, I saw, yet the skies were more brilliant than ever I had seen them. In the ten million years we had crossed, the sun had led his family of worlds into a part of the universe far more thick with stars than had been the case in our own time.

Of all our weird venture that was, I think, the weirdest moment—that in which Fairley and I crouched with Blan above the sleeping plant-city and beneath unfamiliar stars.

At last Blan rose silently. "We can start now," he whispered. "I will approach the gate from the right and you from the left—we will strike together to slay the plant-guards on either side."

"But will their senses warn them of our attack?" I asked.

"Not if we move swiftly enough," Blan replied. "Their strange plant-senses serve them as well as sight and hearing by day, but at night are not so effective, as my people have found. We can slay them before they can give a telepathic alarm if we are swift enough."

**WE GRASPED OUR** simitar-like blades and crept out of the shelter of the lichens and into the clear starlight. Down

the slope we went, our steps as silent as those of ghosts in the soft moss.

Soon we were near enough to the wall and gate to see clearly the two great plants who guarded the opening. Their slow-waving tendrils showed that they were still waking and watchful. Blan noiselessly left our side, gliding away like a white phantom to the right, and then he on one side and Fairley and I on the other, were creeping toward the gate, keeping far enough aside from it to be out of range of the strange senses of the guarding plants.

We two reached the metal wall, and hugging it began a slow stealthy progress along it toward the gate-opening. Reaching that opening we hesitated, our swords tight-gripped in our hands. Then we saw Blan appear on the gate's other side, slipping along the wall like ourselves, a gliding white form. He too halted, grasping his blade, and then with one hand made a silent signal to us. Instantly he and we were leaping around the wall's corner onto the two great plants.

The great plant that Fairley and I sprang for loomed before us as a dark many-armed object, whose tendrils whipped wildly as our blades slashed lightning-like through them.

One of the tendrils, even as it was cut through, coiled like a dark plant-snake around Fairley, but our slashes had been true and had cloven the big plant's central trunk or core through at the base. Its movements ceased, and as we turned wildly we saw that Blan too had slain with a single terrific blow the other of the plant-guards.

We stood silent, breathless, waiting in indescribable suspense for the alarm that would follow had the plant-guards been able to fling a thought-warning into the city in dying. But there came no alarm, the stalking-machines in the city striding to and fro as before.



"We are safe for the moment," Blan whispered. "We killed them before they could give warning. But we must make haste—if they are found dead like this by any of the stalking-machines we will be trapped inside the city!"

"The pits!" I exclaimed. "Let's get at our search—the sooner we find Norton and Julla the better."

We ran silently through the gate and between its sprawled dead guards, toward the ring of square pits that belted the city inside the wall. My heart sank as I visualized the number of them and the thousands of slaves they held, but I knew that only by systematic search of them could we find the men we sought.

In moments we were at the edge of the nearest of the pits. It was some thirty feet square and as deep. Working silently but swiftly we located the ladder we had seen dropped into it, and after a little examination of its simple mechanism unwound the flexible ladder again and dropped it into the pit.

Then while Fairley stood watch at the ladder's top, Blan and I climbed quickly down into the pit. Its bottom was covered by a tangled mass of humanity sprawled in sleep, white-skinned forms in every posture, lying sleeping in the clear starlight that penetrated the pit.

By the starlight we examined their faces swiftly, stepping over them with infinite care as we did so. Were we to awake them it would mean inevitable alarm and discovery, for we could not hope to rescue any number of them and the clamor of those left behind would rouse the city. Also, as Blan had told us, many of the slaves had become so habituated to their servitude that they would have betrayed to their plant-masters any fellow-slave who attempted to escape.

Within minutes we had satisfied ourselves that none in that pit were those we

sought, and quickly we climbed the ladder and wound it up again, so that none of the slaves might wake and find it and arouse the plant-guards.

We raced on to the next pit. Back farther in the city the guardian stalking-machines were coming and going watchfully still, but we paid them almost no attention for the moment in the tenseness of our search. Our search of the second pit was a repetition of that of the first, yet in that pit neither were the men for whom we searched. And when we searched a third pit, and a fourth and a fifth, without further results, a despair latent in me from the first strengthened and would not be banished. How could we hope to find in all the city's pits and all its slaves the two we sought, before we ourselves were discovered?

And as Fairley and Blan and I hastened on toward the sixth pit, we had abrupt warning that discovery was close at hand. A stalking-machine, coming from ahead, loomed suddenly up in the starlight before us!

As one we flung ourselves aside, into the shadow of a looming mixing-machine to our right. With crashing strides the huge machine stalked toward us, the plants high up in its cup visible to us as dark many-tendrilled shapes. One of its four giant limbs crashed down but a few feet from where we lay, and I had a horrible moment in which it seemed that the towering shape was halting over us. It passed on, though, going along the ring of pits in the direction we had come.

"It's going in the direction of the gate!" Fairley whispered as we scrambled to our feet. "If it finds those dead plants there——"

"The next pit!" Blan exclaimed. "We've got to keep up the search—if we don't find them soon now, it's all up with all of us!"

*(Please turn to page 426)*

# Ten Million Years Ahead

(Continued from page 319)

We leapt out of the mixing-machine's shadow, ran on past a group of stalking-machines that rested with folded limbs and cups close to the ground, the plants in those cups sleeping. We reached the sixth pit's edge and speedily lowered the ladder into it.

Even while the ladder was still lowering, Blan and I were climbing down it. We had stepped over only the first of the white forms sprawled in sleep at the pit's bottom, when Blan uttered a fierce low exclamation, grasped one of the sleeping men and with hand close over his mouth shook him swiftly to wakefulness.

"Julla!" he was whispering to the awakened and bewildered man. "It is I, Blan—we have come for you!"

"Blan!" the other choked, strangled with amazement. "But if you are not a slave too how did you——"

"Later," Blan told him. "We have another to find, Julla—it is my brother," he added to me, his face working.

"Look!" Julla hissed to us. "One comes!"

A white form, as though attracted by our voices, had risen from the sprawled men at the pit's farther side and was coming toward us!

"If he wakes the others it's the end!" I whispered. "Jump him now before he can make an outcry!"

Even as I spoke I had leapt, with Blan and Julla with me, over the sprawled sleepers toward that advancing form. I struck the fellow, gripped him, and then as he uttered a low cry I swayed back from him.

"Norton!" I cried. "Blan, it's Norton!"

"You, Olcott!" Norton exclaimed. "Good God, you here!"

"We came after you," I whispered, and

in a few words told him how Fairley and I after his capture had encountered the white men, one of whom had come with us in our search for his own brother, whom we had just found. I saw now that Norton was wearing a moss tunic like ours and those of the other slaves, which the plants had had him don when he was put into the ranks of their slaves.

"The others in this pit are all sleeping," he said. "I could not sleep, as you can imagine, and when I saw you climb down into the pit could not understand what was going on."

"Well, up out of it now!" I exclaimed. "The sooner out of this hell-spawned city the better!"

**B**LAN and Julla were already on the ladder and Norton and I climbed swiftly up after them, Fairley gripping Norton's hand excitedly when we reached the top. Not stopping to raise the ladder this time, we turned from the pit to start back toward the gate.

Across the starlit city we could see two stalking-machines moving, apparently together, near the gate, one of them being the one that had almost discovered us minutes before. Discover us they might yet when we reached the gate, we knew, for they were very near it. Keeping as much as possible in the shade of machines, our little group started at a quick run in the gate's direction.

Before we had gone a dozen yards, however, we halted as one. The two stalking-machines ahead had taken up a position between us and the gate and were motionless there, the plants in their operating-cups perhaps conversing by thought-exchange. It would be impossible for us to pass beneath them or reach the gate in any way without their sensing us.

And at any moment they might themselves find the dead plant-guards at the gate.

"Rush for it!" Fairley whispered. "We might get past them and out before they were aware of us!"

Julla shook his head. "They would have us with the great arms of those stalking-machines before ever we reached the gate!" he said.

"But we can't stay here!" Fairley exclaimed. "Any moment will see the alarm given now!"

"Look!" Norton cried. "There's our way out!"

He was pointing toward the group of resting stalking-machines beside which we had halted, stooped, giant shapes with limbs folded beneath them and plants sleeping in their operating-cups.

"In one of them we could pass the other machines without challenge, perhaps," Norton said.

"But we can't operate them!" I objected.

"I can, I'm sure," he replied. "When I was captured and brought here in one of the stalking-machines I watched their way of control and it looked simple enough. If we can capture one and get out in it, it would be easy to get back into the forest, and to our time-doubler!"

"It's our best chance!" Blan agreed. "We three with weapons will climb up first into the cup of this nearest one!"

At once Fairley and I leapt with Blan toward the nearest of the resting stalking-machines. Its cup, resting on its folded jointed limbs, was three or four times our height from the ground. Holding to the great folded metal limbs we began to clamber upward, our metal blades in our grasp.

It was a short but agonizing climb, our weapons hampering us and the smooth metal giving us little hold. We reached at last the edge of the great operating-cup and drew ourselves slowly up onto

it. In the black soil-element that filled the cup three great plants were rooted, around the central control-levers of the great machine. All three were sleeping, tendrils closed in torpor about their trunks.

There was the dull sound of three heavy blows as our swords flashed out in slicing blows that cut the three monsters through close to their roots. Thrusting their bodies out of the cup, the tendrils still closing and unclosing in reflex movements, we helped pull up Norton and Julla into the cup. At once Norton fastened upon the control-levers.

He studied them for a moment, we waiting in an agony of suspense, and then a little doubtfully pulled one back. There was no response, but he jerked another, in a different direction. The next moment we were all sprawling upon the soil of the operating-cup as the giant limbs beneath it unfolded, hoisting the cup high into the air upon them as they straightened.

Norton, confidently now, moved a third lever and the giant limbs began swinging in huge, regular strides beneath us, as the stalking-machine we rode started into the city. He changed the lever's position and the direction of the machine's stride changed, it headed toward the gate. Crouching flat in the operating-cup, we stared ahead and saw that the two stalking-machines ahead were themselves moving toward the gate.

The cup swayed this way and that as our machine's giant steps took it forward, and we clung on as best we might. Fairley and I were peering ahead with Norton, but Blan and Julla seemed both smitten with terror as they rode thus one of the huge mechanisms of the dreaded plants. Norton guided our striding machine a little to the left as one of its steps almost took it into one of the slave-pits. **A**nd as he moved the fourth lever in the

control-box experimentally, the mighty metal arms that dangled from the operating-cup straightened and moved this way and that swiftly.

Suddenly as we neared the gate we saw the two stalking-machines ahead reach the opening, stoop down over it for a moment, then straighten. There was no sound, but in the next instant there came a great rustle of movement from across the whole plant-city behind us, plants waking and unfolding their tendrils, scores of stalking-machines rising ponderously and striding crashingly over the city toward us, converging upon us rapidly!

"The alarm!" cried Blan, all attempt at concealment gone now. "They've found those we slew at the gate—the whole city is rousing!"

"We can't pass those ahead now, then!" Fairley exclaimed.

"We *can* pass them!" Norton cried. "Hold tight—we're going to smash our way through them!"

**T**HE next moments exist in my memory now only as lightning-flashes of incredible action. Our giant machine was striding forward with increased speed toward the gate, and the two stalking-machines there, as though the plants on them had divined that we were those who had slain the guards, were striding to meet us.

I saw their huge metal arms upraised as we leapt toward them and then saw Norton working the fourth control-lever madly, our own machine's arms swinging up to meet the other! Full into one of the two great shapes we crashed, metal clashing against metal. Its arms shot forth to grasp and hold our mechanism but as Norton turned the fourth lever our own machine's arms flashed down from their upraised position to smash the operating-cup and controlling plants of the other

into crumpled metal and crushed plant-bodies!

"One of them!" Norton yelled, a mad lust of battle surging up in him.

"Behind us! The other!" I cried.

The other machine's arms were reaching forth to grasp us, and though we turned swiftly it had caught a limb of our mechanism with one arm and was reaching up with the other to pluck us from the cup! I glimpsed the plants in the cup of the other working its controls with their tendrils swiftly, and then Norton had shot up one of our own great arms to catch the free arm of the other and prevent it from reaching us! Our stalking-machine swayed with the other, locked in colossal combat as of battling giants!

"The others are coming!" Fairley cried hoarsely. "Norton——!"

The other machine loosed its grip suddenly on ours and swept both great arms toward us to smash us in our own operating-cup with a great blow. But it was the opening Norton had awaited and he sent our mechanism's arms out in a great push that struck the other machine, and sent it reeling and falling, to crash down full-length among the massed machines and plants and slave-pits.

But the scores of stalking-machines rushing with giant strides from across the whole city toward us were very near us, their own mighty arms upraised.

"Out—out of the gate!" Blan yelled.

"Out, Norton—for God's sake!"

Norton, his face wild from the battle, jammed back the second lever and our great mechanism strode toward the narrow gate. We reached it, were through it, and then we were clinging in the cup as it swayed desperately, the machine climbing the slope that led to the lichen-forest.

Behind us the plant-city was in turmoil, stalking-machines rushing across it, slaves

awakening and shouting, a babel of strange sound. And before we had reached the crest of the slope, there were emerging from the gate after us a score of the first of our pursuers, giant gleaming shapes stalking close on our track!

"The time-doubler!" I cried. "Head straight on, Norton—it will bring us to the gully where we left the doubler!"

"But what of Blan and Julla?" he asked.

"The opening of their burrow is not far from the doubler!" I told him. "If we can reach it before these behind overtake us, we'll all have a chance!"

Our machine had reached the top of the slope by then and was crashing through the lichen-forest with mighty strides. After us came the mighty forms of our pursuers, for there could be no evasion of them in the clear starlight.

That starlight alone enabled me to guide Norton and our machine in the direction in which I knew the time-doubler lay. If we could reach it—if it had not been found or tampered with—the two thoughts beat monotonously in my brain to the rhythm of our great onward strides. Within minutes our huge steps had taken us half the distance to the time-doubler, I estimated, scores of our giant pursuers now crashing through the lichen-forest after us. We could make it—could make it—

Abruptly the strides of our stalking-machine began to lessen, to weaken!

Norton pulled frantically at its levers. "That fight with the other machines—our crash—it damaged this one!" he cried.

Before we could fully comprehend the appalling fact, the machine had stopped altogether!

Instantly Norton thrust forward the lever that caused its limbs to fold under it. And as the cup sank down onto the folded limbs, he was leaping with us out of it and to the ground. Wordlessly,

spurred by the crash of pursuit behind, we ran forward through the lichen-forest.

We heard the pursuing machines come up to our deserted one, halting about it, and then spreading out and coming on again in renewed pursuit. So silent were our steps on the moss, and so crashing their huge strides, that we seemed like white ghosts fleeing from giants. And they were swiftly overtaking us now!

Blan and Julla halted suddenly, and I saw beside us the clump of lichens that hid the entrance to their burrow.

"Down here with us!" Blan cried. "You can hide until their pursuit has ended!"

"No!" Norton exclaimed. "They'll find the time-doubler and with it destroyed our last chance to get back to our own time is gone. We're going on!"

"Then we go on with you!" cried Blan and Julla together.

For a moment, despite the crashing behind us that told of the nearing pursuit, Norton, and Fairley and I with him, grasped the hands of the two men. For it was only in that wild moment that we saw, at last, that despite all the changes of ten million years, man still was man. But in the next instant we had pushed them from us, into the lichen-clump. And with that wordless farewell, before they could follow, we were gone, racing on.

**H**EART pounding and lungs seeming to breathe flame, I felt myself staggering as we neared the gully where our time-doubler lay. For the moment as we stumbled into it, the crashing stalking-machines but a hundred yards behind us now, my heart sank lead-like as I saw no sign of the time-doubler. But Norton half dragged me forward and then I saw it, lying at the gully's bottom as we had left it, tilted a little awry still.

We reached it, fell and sprawled inside it, as a half-dozen stalking-machines

burst into the little gully after us. I saw Norton weakly pull forth three of the plugs on the doubler's control-case, and as he did so the first of the stalking-machines reached us, towered over us a colossal gleaming shape in the starlight, great arms upraised. Then, as the arms smashed down toward us in the blow that meant annihilation, there was a click as Norton replaced the plugs, a purring hum that was instantly thunderous, and then a blackness that I knew was oblivion.

From that blackness I emerged as before, without remembrance at first of my surroundings. I was lying sprawled with the unconscious other two in the time-doubler, but it stood now not in the mosses of the gully but in a big white-lit room that was for the moment utterly strange to my eyes. Then I remembered. Norton's laboratory! I staggered to my feet, uttering inarticulate sounds.

I bent over the other two, shook them weakly. They stirred, slowly revived, stumbled up and gazed about them with the same amazement that had at first been mine. And then as Norton and Fairley took in the big workroom's apparatus-filled interior, and remembered too, we were crying out together, incoherent in our first emotions.

"We did get back!" Fairley was half weeping. "Back to our own time—our own time!"

We became aware suddenly of what a strange picture we presented, as we stumbled out of the time-doubler. The three of us standing there in the neat workroom seemed grotesque to each other's eyes. Bareheaded and dressed only in the tunics of woven moss, with Fairley and me clutching still our great metal blades—we seemed like three men from another world.

It was some time before we got back to any semblance of normality and sanity. By the clock, we found, we had been

gone from the laboratory a little more than one minute. This was the time it had taken Norton to turn on the time-doubler's controls at our start. Our leap across a hundred thousand centuries, and even the hours we had spent in that world of the far future, had been compressed into that minute.

"One minute in one sense and more than ten million years in another," Norton said. "One minute—yet we lived for hours during it in the world of ten million years from now."

"And almost died in it, too," Fairley added.

"It will haunt me, what we saw in that world," I said somberly. "What we saw of earth's future, and man's, with all men creeping in beast-like fear of monstrous plants."

Norton shook his head. "Not all were so," he said. "Not Blan and Julla! Species rise and rule and fall again—we have seen how in that far day man will have fallen and the plants will have risen in his place to be lords of earth. But who can know what lies beyond even that far time we saw? We three will never know, for we know but too well now that to move out of one's own time is a thing forbidden, a thing terrible, and only with the time-doubler destroyed will we ever again feel easy.

"But we do know that beyond the ten million years whose culminated changes we saw, there lie other countless centuries and other changes. In that farther time the plants must fall from their lordship of earth as its other lords have fallen, and who can tell but that man will rise in their place again? Who can say but that we saw only a temporary reverse or setback in our race's progress, soon to be overcome, a mere strange episode in man's titanic upward march from the sea-slime to the stars?"