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FARNSWORTH WRIGHT, Editor.

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Contents for March, 1929

- Cover Design..... C. C. Senf
Illustrating a scene in "The People of Pan"
- The People of Pan..... Henry S. Whitehead 292
Under the surface of a West Indian island Canevin found a strange people who worshiped Pan—then the catastrophe
- The City of Iron Cubes (Part 1)..... H. F. Arnold 306
A two-part weird-scientific serial story by the author of "The Night Wire"—strange invaders from space land in Peru
- The Immortal Hand..... Arlton Eadie 325
A ghost-story of Shakespeare and Stratford-on-Avon—three tourists make a startling discovery
- Visions in Smoke..... Rufus W. Landon 332
Verse
- The Deserted Garden..... August W. Derleth 333
He investigated the mysterious death of his predecessor—and himself fell a victim to an elemental spirit

[CONTINUED ON NEXT PAGE]

- The Rat**-----**S. Fowler Wright** 337
The surgeon experimented on a blind rat, then committed a strange murder—a story by the author of "The Deluge"
- The Sea Horror**-----**Edmond Hamilton** 351
In their cities in the ocean depths the slug-people launched their war against the civilization of man
- The Hounds of Tindalos**-----**Frank Belknap Long, Jr.** 373
A tale of unutterable horror—of a pursuit by loathsome entities through the ages and through the dimensions
- Ballade of Wandering Ghosts**-----**Hanna Baird Campbell** 382
Verse
- The Vengeance of the Dead (Conclusion)**-----**Eli Colter** 383
A two-part serial story of a strange monstrosity whose ghastly depredations terrified the guests at Waggener Wilds
- The Celadon Vase**-----**John Murray Reynolds** 397
The alchemist devised an ingenious trap in which to catch his lady and test her faithfulness
- Folks Used to Believe:**
- May Dew**-----**Alvin F. Harlow** 403
One of the strange superstitions of our ancestors
- Left by the Tide**-----**Edward E. Schiff** 404
A bizarre tale of the sea—the story of a gruesome struggle with a monstrosity out of the deeps
- Weird Story Reprint:**
- The Phantom Farmhouse**-----**Seabury Quinn** 406
A reprint from Weird Tales of six years ago—a werewolf story of unusual pathos and beauty
- Sonnets of the Midnight Hours:**
- 12. A Vision of the Future**-----**Donald Wandrei** 420
Verse; decoration by Hugh Rankin
- The Eyrie**-----**421**
A chat with the readers

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The CITY of IRON CUBES

by H.F. Arnold



"Without a sound she threw up her arms and collapsed on the floor."

THROUGHOUT the journey from Lima he had ridden ahead of me over the desert and across the mountain in that same silent slouching fashion. It was not that he was deaf, because on occasions at night and morning I had overheard him whining plaintive melodies to his horse. But his lack of conversation was getting upon my nerves.

For that matter the country through which we were passing was in itself enough to discomfort one. For ten days the Peruvian desert had been a continual, never-ending stretch of cream-colored sand, dirtied here and there by a clump of sparsely creeping brush. Nights had found us always at the same-appearing group of tiny trees with a muddy waterhole in the center from which they drew their life.

At last we had reached the mountains and for another ten days had wound our way in and out, through narrow passes and over treacherous summits. We traveled always easterly into the very heart of the Andes.

It was extraordinary foolishness that was driving me on. Dr. Frelinghusen was an old friend both to me and my father, but unless I had thought him in dire need I would never have answered his message in person. I carried it with me in my pocket. There were only seven words:

COME TO ME, DANA. I NEED YOU.

Just that, on a yellow cablegram blank, yet I had traveled half around the world to answer it. Frelinghusen had a way with him which made even his colleagues of the Royal Society eager to be of service. His reputation as the leading seismologist of his time was in itself sufficient to command attention, and ordinarily to secure obedience to his wishes.

So I, Dana Harrod, age thirty-seven, ex-captain in His Majesty's

engineers, had dropped the labor of a lifetime to travel to the world's end to satisfy the whim of an old man. In Lima I had met the vaquero who in dumb show had offered me one of Frelinghusen's cards on which was scrawled:

Get provisions for three weeks and follow the bearer.

It was now nearing dusk of the twentieth day, and we must be approaching our destination. The vaquero rode on ahead as usual, but at last he appeared to be shedding his customary preoccupation. Instead of riding with his head sunk between his shoulders he was eyeing the country around us. Now to right and to left, his sharp black eyes searched the landscape anxiously. His expression, interpreted in actions known the world over, had only one meaning—anxiety and growing fear.

During the last hour we had been ascending rapidly and the heavy tropical vegetation was thinning out as we reached an elevation of more than a mile. We were moving up the slope of a huge mountain whose sides were very steep. The summit was peculiar in formation, differing from the peaks around it in that its crest had, when seen from a distance, the appearance of having been snapped off as cleanly as though cut by a giant knife. What was left constituted a plateau which, when I had viewed it from the top of the pass the day before, I judged to be about two miles across.

A half-hour above the horizon, the sun hung as a pulsating living ball of molten flame. Around it, for the first time, as I remembered, were wraiths of mist which thickened as I watched.

The vaquero stopped his horse to rise in his stirrups and peer ahead of him. I noticed then that we had nearly reached the crest. Suddenly he whirled his horse and darted toward me. Dust clouds kicked up

by the mare's flying heels twisted themselves into fantastic shapes.

In an instant he was past. Alarmed, I turned in my saddle to look after him. With the flat of his hand he was motioning me to continue up the path. Seeing that I had caught his signal, he raised his arm above his head and gave vent to a single shrill yell. Then he rounded a curve and vanished from sight. For a time I heard the clatter of his horse's hoofs as the beast raced down the mountain; then all was silent as before.

There were but slight chances of overtaking him, so I once more turned my horse and continued up the grade. Night was coming on swiftly and I visioned spending it alone without fire or water. Musing on the strange behavior of my guide, I rode for perhaps ten minutes in silence while the sun sank lower and lower. Then, as I reached the crest, I saw a sight so unusual that I uttered an exclamation of surprize.

Half concealed by wisps of cloud floating over the plateau and directly in front of me was an immense, reddish-black rock, partly buried in the sand. It must have protruded from the soil at least three hundred feet. The rock was splotched here and there with rust-colored corrosions which, even at that distance, to my experienced eye denoted that the material in the composition could be nothing else but iron.

However, the first peculiarity of the rock which had impressed me was its shape rather than its composition. Its dimensions, allowing for the amount sunk in the sands, were those of a perfect cube.

As I drew nearer I saw that my first impression had been correct. Save where the edges had been slightly blunted, the immense column was as perfectly formed as the huge stone blocks of the pyramids. I reined my tired horse to the nearest side and tapped lightly on the surface with the butt of my revolver.

I had not been mistaken. The block was of iron, but of an alloy that I had never seen before.

Then, by the last strong rays of the sun, I saw through the mist another cube, and then another. Three, four, five—God, there was a regular city of them! The sun sank below the horizon and cut off the view. From the darkness came a faint, ringing cry:

“Hello! Hello!”

I recognized the voice. It was that of my old teacher and friend. With a shout I spurred my horse through the dusk and a minute later we were shaking hands.

“My boy, my boy, to think that you have really come!”

Overcome by emotion, he pumped my arm enthusiastically and stared into my eyes, too proud to hide the flowing tears in his own.

After a few minutes we calmed sufficiently for me to take notice of my surroundings again.

“Doctor, however did you do it? And why?” I gestured at the immense piles of iron hidden now under their blanket of darkness. He chuckled in answer.

“I didn't, my boy, but I'd give my life to know who did and why they did it. But come, the answer can wait. It has been waiting now for a good many years.” And he led the way through the night.

A FEW hundred yards found us at his hut, half hidden under the shadow of one of the immense cubes. My weary horse was too exhausted to wander far, so I turned him loose to find his way to food and water. Then I entered the lighted interior, where keen odors announced that Dr. Frelinghusen had preceded me for cause.

Putting aside my eager inquiries, he forced me to the table, where a meal was waiting. It was indeed welcome, for the mountain air at that elevation induced a keen appe-

tite. A half-hour later, having done full duty to the repast, I pushed back my chair and refused to allow my questioning to be delayed any longer.

Dr. Frelinghusen piled fresh wood on the fire and lighted his pipe before he would oblige me. In the fire-light his three-score years appeared to weigh upon him and I saw that he was much thinner and more careworn than when I had seen him last. His straight shoulders were now heavily bowed and, never a tall man, he now seemed to have shrunk to much less than his former size. Only his eyes were unchanged, and they were as black and startling as ever before. Peering out from under the bushy white eyebrows, they nearly struck one dumb with the intensity of their suppressed excitement.

"Dana," he said, "I have something to show you." And he pushed back his chair to go over to a cupboard in one corner and return with a fragment of metal in his hand.

"Here it is," he said. "What do you make of it?"

I turned the piece over in my hand and examined it carefully before replying. It was obviously a fragment chipped from one of the monsters surrounding us. I told him as much.

"You are right," he acknowledged, "but what else do you notice about it?"

I examined the fragment again.

"Why," I said, "the metal is nearly pure and has been very nearly fused. I should say that it has, at one time or another, been subjected to intense heat."

The doctor smiled in satisfaction.

"You are right again. I am glad to see that you have not lost your keenness. Aside from the fact that the piece is obviously of refined iron ore, your analysis covers the field entirely."

"That goes without saying," I returned. "But why? What is the meaning of it all? Why those iron

monsters circled on the plateau plain around us, and who or what placed them there?"

"I wish I knew," he said. "I have a suspicion, but it is hardly enough even to guess at. However, I will tell you what I think." He settled himself more comfortably in his chair and drew a long puff from his pipe. "It's so good to have someone to talk to," he said. "My boy, you are the first white man I've seen in nearly three years."

I gestured impatiently.

"Oh, the guess is coming," he said; "I won't keep it back any longer. As you know, my specialty for many years has been earthquakes and their causes. I flatter myself that I know as much about them as any person living, which"—and he grimaced—"I must admit isn't much.

"Some twenty years ago I became interested in this section of Peru, where earthquakes are so common that the natives never even mention them. One fact about the Peruvian quakes especially fascinated me. It was that periodically, every four years, there was one sharp shock which could not be accounted for by any methods I have ever used or heard of.

"These periodical shocks were followed by no settling tremors; that is to say, there were no after-shocks. Just one distinct temblor and there were no more of that particular variety of earthquake for another four years. The temblors, as I found after sixteen years of study, could be forecast to the very minute. It was most peculiar.

"Another feature was that the tremors were accompanied by disturbances in the sky. This was not highly unusual, because the sky was aflame when the great quake shook Peru on August 13, 1868. Conventionalists wrote that this fiery appearance was a reflection from a Peruvian volcano, but the subject

was investigated by M. Gay, according to whom—see *Comptes Rendus*, 69, 262—there had been no volcanic activity in Peru at the time.

“We have many similar instances of earth tremors accompanied by sky disturbances. One of them occurred in Madrid on February 10, 1896, when the wall of a building occupied by the American embassy was thrown down. Stones fell from the sky, and for five hours and a half a cloud of meteoric debris hung over the city. See the *Scientific American*, 74, 179.

“So you see, aerial disturbances and earthquakes are rather often related. But suppose the aerial disturbance and the earthquake occur at periodic intervals? What then? And suppose this periodic combination of earthquake and sky disturbance occurs always at the same spot on the earth’s surface? Such a repetition would disrupt the beliefs and statements of science because it would indicate only one of two possible conclusions—either that the earth was stationary or that some power was directing the meteorites so that they would land at some particular spot on the earth’s surface at a defined time.

“I had even a previous occurrence somewhat like the one I had supposed, to work with.

“On June 12, 1858, as reported in the Birmingham, England, *Daily Post* of June 14, hundreds of thousands of tiny black aerolites poured from the sky upon the streets of Birmingham. In June, 1860, tremendous numbers of similar stones fell from the sky at Wolverhampton, a town thirteen miles from Birmingham. (*La Science Pour Tous*, June 19, 1860.) In the *Field*, September 8, 1860, a correspondent wrote that on the 13th of August, after a thunderstorm, the streets of Birmingham were found to have been covered with little stones which were thought to have fallen from the sky.

On May 29, 1868, enormous numbers of little black stones were seen to fall from the sky at Birmingham (Birmingham *Daily Post*, May 30, 1868). After a severe storm similar stones fell at Wolverhampton on May 25, 1869. (*Symons’ Meteorological Magazine*, 4, 137.)

“This is but one recorded instance of several such series of phenomena,” said the doctor. “What does it indicate to you?”

I stared at him in astonishment. “I can think of no other conclusions than the ones you have drawn,” I told him.

“That was the way I reasoned it, anyway,” replied Dr. Frelinghusen, “and that is why I wanted, more than I have ever wanted anything else in my life, to investigate these tremors and disturbances in Peru. I could draw but two conclusions: either the earth was stationary and all scientists were fools, or else”—and he stopped to relight his pipe—“or else the disturbances were caused by some unknown power operating periodically.

“That was my belief when I landed in Peru three and a half years ago, and I have found no reason to alter it since. As my ship entered the harbor, port officials told me that my last forecast had been correct and that there had been another single and unaccountable shock on the night of July 25, 1921. It gave me new confidence.

“For six months I searched the unexplored regions of Peru for fragments of meteors. Then I stumbled upon this plateau and have, except for one short period, stayed here ever since. These cubes were all of them here when I arrived.

I was beginning to understand. “Doctor,” I gasped, “you mean that—?”

He nodded. “I mean that these seven cubes of iron that I found on this plateau are the meteors which, during the past twenty-eight years, have periodically, at four-year inter-

vals, landed on the earth at this latitude and longitude, here in Peru.”

THE news, which unconsciously I had been expecting, nevertheless appalled me. After a moment, I rallied.

“And have you decided, Doctor? You have devoted more than three years to studying them. Are they natural? Is the earth a stationary body? Or else——?” But the seemingly inevitable alternative struck me dumb.

He ended my question. “Or else have they been directed by some unknown and possibly malignant force, you would ask?” He rose from his chair and paced the floor. “My boy,” he said finally, “I do not understand how anything else could be true. I believe that for the past twenty-eight years and possibly longer, some conscious force or forces has propelled a series of bodies—projectiles if you like—at this earth and that seven of them have come safely to rest upon this plateau.”

My courage had come back. “And the reason?”

“Is obvious. Each time a cube arrived, the earth shock has been perceptibly lighter. That is, the cube has landed more easily. The last temblor was scarcely noticeable in Lima.”

“And that means?”

“That the time will come when—sooner or later—the cubes will land easily enough so that they might contain an occupant or occupants who would survive the shock.”

“Men?”

The doctor paused in his stride to look me squarely in the eyes. “Not necessarily,” he replied. “I don’t know.”

My nervousness would not allow me to sit quietly any longer. I sprang to my feet and hurried to the window. The air in the room seemed stifling.

“Dr. Frelinghusen,” I asked, “when is the next cube due?”

The old man walked over and rested his hand on my shoulder. “Dana,” he said, “you arrived barely in time. The shock of impact, by my calculations, is due at 10:45 tomorrow night.”

At that instant, with the suddenness peculiar to tropical countries the moon appeared above the horizon, and with awe in my heart I gazed out over the plateau where, their black sides shining ominously, the seven gigantic cubes reflected the soft rays of the lunar body. Beside them, to complete a huge circle, I visioned an empty space where—how soon now?—would rest another visitor.

I turned and faced the doctor. “Are you sure that there is no mistake in your calculations?” I asked.

The question, which would have angered a more ignorant man, served only to amuse him. His pipe between his lips, he twiddled his thumbs and looked me in the eye.

“Dana,” he asked, “did you ever know me to calculate anything four times and make an error?”

“Nevertheless,” I persisted, “there is the possibility that——”

“I know,” he interrupted, “and there is no possibility that should be overlooked. Come, we will check them over together.”

And so, pencils in hand, we hunched over the rough wooden table in the center of the room and pored over the columns of figures. The calculations were tediously intricate and involved. They took many hours and all my skill to check and understand them. But at last, when dawn and the sun lightened our retreat, I was convinced. Barring some inconceivable error, a terrestrial visitor was due to arrive within the atmosphere of our planet within the next twenty-four hours. It was all true.

SOBERED and a trifle haggard from the night’s work, I led the way out through the narrow, hand-hewn door to the outdoors and the sunshine. To

my eyes, accustomed to the soft rays of the kerosene lamp, everything for an interval appeared strained and unreal. Then I realized that the scene was very beautiful. The plateau, which sloped gently from the crest to form a gentle bowl, was a miniature paradise. A tiny stream trickled from a little spring behind the house to meander its way through a grassy meadow, uncaring or perhaps ignorant of the fact that it was to drop down 5,000 feet in a shower of rainbow-hued spray a few miles farther on. My horse, munching the grass beside the brook, lifted his head to neigh a welcome as we approached.

But in the fresh light of day, the seven blackened visitors from a port unknown appeared more massive, more grotesque than before. Indecent blocks of inanimate brutal metal, they desecrated our tiny paradise, suggesting, somehow, gaunt and weary warriors gazing lustfully at a countryside rich in goods and women and but poorly defended.

"The natives call this plateau *El Tahunjero*," remarked my friend. "It is a native word meaning something similar to ghosts; that is, ghosts with infinite power and eternal malice. Nothing can persuade the natives to climb to the summit of this mountain. They believe it to be haunted—which is why, as you noticed, your vaquero left you on the trail.

"But come," he added in a brisker tone, "let us breakfast and then I will show you our visitors more closely."

We followed his suggestion, and an hour later, feeling somewhat refreshed, took up the work of examination. As the professor pointed out, each cube was sunk a trifle less deeply in the earth than was its predecessor which had arrived four years earlier. As the wind allowed no dust to accumulate on the plateau, it was only possible to reason that each new arrival had hit the earth more lightly than the one before.

Giving the first six cubes but a cursory examination, we moved on to the seventh and last, where my attention was attracted to a peculiar indentation on its surface.

"Come here, Doctor," I called. "What do you make of this?"

He hurried to my side and focused his spectacles against the wall.

"Why, it looks like a door," he said finally. "It is peculiar that I never noticed it before."

In the meantime I had moved closer so that I could examine the phenomenon. It was indeed a doorway fused fast into the solid metal, and of a size that was all of ten feet high by an equal width. In my interest I walked directly to the cube and rested my hand against the metal—only to leap back with an exclamation of pain.

The metal was nearly red-hot!

"It is not peculiar that you did not notice it," I said, "because in my opinion the outlines of this door were not before perceptible. They are being brought out by an internal heat."

"Dana," he cried, "what do you mean?"

"Come here and look," I told him. "The metal is getting hotter all the time."

Before our very eyes, the iron ore was being heated by some unknown force in the interior of the cube. In five minutes more, it turned a dull red. In twenty minutes the space occupied by the door was cherry pink. At that time we first became aware of a dull hissing sound similar to the roar of escaping steam when heard from a distance.

"Doctor," I shouted, "get back. Whatever is in your cube is coming out."

Hastily we retired to a safe distance, but barely in time; for, with a roar equal, it seemed, to twenty Niagaras, a huge jet of flame shot through an upper corner of the door's outline and for a distance of a hundred feet from the side of the mon-

ster. With the power of a demon and as effortless as a giant knife cutting through cheese, the flame traced the outlines of the archway, up one side, across the top and down on the other. Then, as we watched in breathless wonder, the flame knife cut through the bottom and the entire door fell outward with a deafening clang of heated metal.

Through the space left vacant we caught a momentary glimpse of a blazing interior as menacing as the dark mad mouth of hell. Then, as suddenly as though they had been snuffed by a giant forefinger, the flames went out.

"Most extraordinary," sniffed the doctor and reached forward for his spectacles, which in his excitement had fallen forward on the ground. "Whatever do you suppose is going to happen next?"

"I don't know," I responded, "but it would be my guess that if whatever is in there is alive and human, it is waiting for the metal to cool before attempting to come out.

"We may as well wait here as anywhere. Come, let us sit down."

Without waiting for his reply, I shoved him ahead of me to the shelter of the sixth cube, where, dripping wet with perspiration from our excitement and the heat of the tropic day, we seated ourselves to await whatever events might take place.

Then another idea occurred to me. "Doctor," I asked, "are you armed?"

"Why, no, Dana," he replied, "I never carry weapons. Do you think that we should?"

"I'm sure of it," I answered. "Wait here while I go back to the cabin and get our rifles."

Waiting only to receive his assent, I hurried back up the trail to the low thatched quarters where the doctor had lived for three years. I picked up two 30-30 repeating rifles and turned to retrace my steps. It was a clear, calm day, ideal for any outdoor purpose, but I realized that the night

was coming. The night when—I raised my head to stare into the blue expanse of heavens above me.

Was it possible that somewhere thousands of miles away in the blue, a dark speck was speeding with the rapidity almost of light toward a rendezvous with our planet? The very idea was ridiculous—but then so were the cubes, and the doctor, and the events which we had just witnessed. To my fevered imagination it seemed that already I could distinguish a faint speck in the cloudless sky. Pshaw! It was only the heat waves rising from the ground.

I hurried down the trail toward the sixth cube, in the shadow of which I had left the doctor.

When I arrived at the spot where he had been seated, he was nowhere to be seen.

Thinking that perhaps I had mistaken the location, I looked in all directions and even walked all the way around the cube. There was no mistake. Although I had been absent scarcely ten minutes, the doctor had vanished as completely as though the skies had opened and—I stared across the valley toward the yawning entranceway with a shiver of apprehension. Could he have walked in without me? Or was it possible that something—some creature beyond my imagining—had come out from that dark hole and seized him in broad daylight?

It seemed impossible that he would willingly have entered without me. Cupping my hands to add force to my cry, I made the echoes answer and re-answer to my shout.

"Doctor! Dr. Frelinghusen!"

There was no response but echoes. Heat waves made the outlines of the seven rust-covered giants appear to wriggle and writhe as if to mock me. The plateau was as silent as death.

TAKING a moment to summon my courage, I then dropped one of the rifles to the ground and, making sure

that the other was loaded and cocked, I made my way across the open expanse of ground. Some undiscovered sixth sense told me that, willingly or unwillingly, the doctor had vanished into the seventh cube. At any rate, it was here that I would search first.

At the entranceway I paused again. Before me the interior was black—not black as a color is black but black with the total absence of all light. It was as if, within a few feet from the surface, an invisible curtain dropped between the interior and the outside world, cutting off even such penetrating particles as light rays. I snapped on an electric torch I had brought with me, and started in.

The interior smelt strongly of molten iron, and I could feel the heat of it penetrate through the soles of my shoes.

Ten feet from the door, my torch, which I had held in front of me, clicked suddenly and went out. I stopped, uncertain what course to pursue next. It was then that I became conscious of a faint tingling, somewhat in the nature of a slight electrical current, which was running up my outstretched arm.

There was no advantage in stopping now. Dropping my useless torch to the ground, I pushed ahead through the blackness. In a few feet, I found that the current had completely enveloped me. It was then I received a second surprise.

I had turned my head to catch my bearings from the light reflected in from the entrance. But there was no light. The door, although I had penetrated not more than a few yards, was invisible. It was startling. I felt trapped, shut in, like a wanderer enveloped in fog.

I turned back toward the outer air and had progressed but a few feet when, with equal suddenness, I found myself at the mouth of the tunnel with clear daylight shining ahead. At the same moment, the tingling sensation ceased.

I was puzzled at the change, and then realized that the current, force, or whatever it was, undoubtedly acted as a non-conductor of light rays. The inside of the cube was indeed a world shut off.

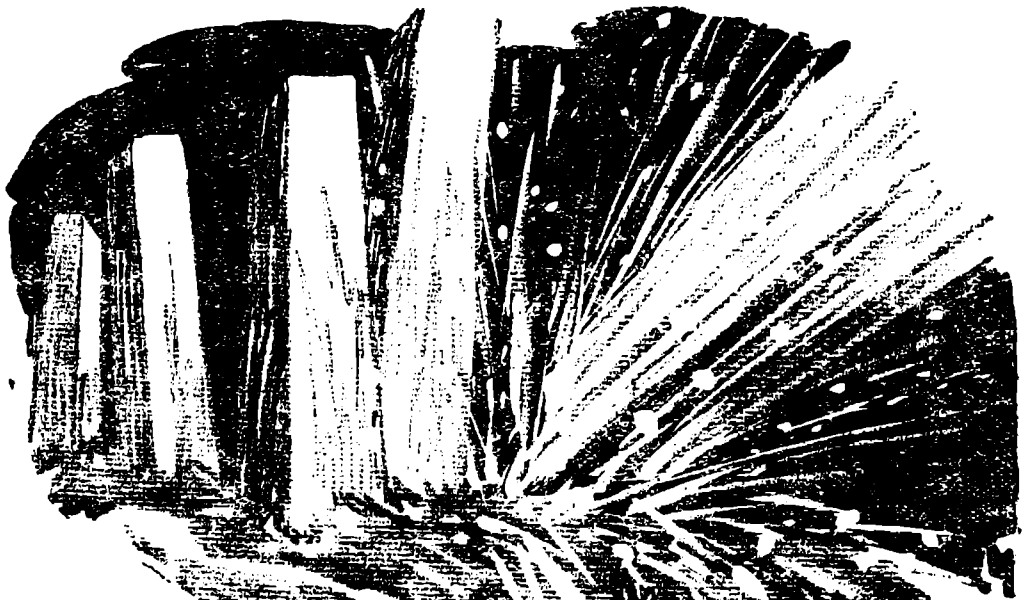
Adjusting the safety catch on my rifle, I once again entered the tunnel and passed the darkness-curtain in safety. I found myself ascending a narrow, iron-sided passageway which wound round and round as it led higher and higher. After a time, I realized that I was circling the rim of the cube and gradually climbing toward the top.

It was as if I were struggling upstream through a swiftly moving current of invisible water—a water that surged, boiled and bubbled around my knees, actuated by mysterious unseen forces. As I climbed, the force of the current increased, rising from my knees to my hips and from my hips to my chest. The situation was indescribably terrible. Alone in the blankness of an eternal night I fought against the insidious, invisible thing which sought to force me back.

Then, far ahead, I heard a faint cry, a cry that echoed and re-echoed through the metallic wall with the wail of a lost soul facing the gates of hell. Through unseen corridors the sound sought an outlet and, finding none, came back to me doubled and trebled. Then it broke and gasped and wailed, changing swiftly into a hideous strident laughter.

“Dana! Dana!” It was the voice again calling my own name, and I recognized the frightened tones of Dr. Frelinghusen. I had been right in surmising that his scientific zeal had caused him to enter the tunnel without me.

Fighting savagely against the binding, unreal cords that held me back, I hurried ahead, rounding curve after curve, scraping and tearing my flesh as I did so against the unpolished iron walls. The force around me relaxed



"At the same instant it struck."

its grip suddenly and I pitched head-long on my face.

I had passed through the current zone. Rising to my feet, I discovered by sense of touch that the walls and floor were no longer metallic but were formed of some hard, smooth substance, obviously a non-conductor. Ahead of me I heard the doctor's voice again:

"Dana! Dana!"

It sounded as if mixed with the fear was a note of mingled impatience and wonder.

My racing feet brought me smack against an abrupt wall and partly stunned me, so that it was almost a minute before I collected my faculties enough to notice that for the first time the passageway had turned sharply to the right. Then, most welcome of sights, I saw a blaze of light with the doctor's figure outlined sharply as he pressed his face against a transparent obstacle from the other side of which came the rays. He appeared to be uninjured.

Hearing my footsteps, he beckoned

without turning his head. Subduing my feeling of gratitude that he was unharmed, I hastened to his side. He was gazing at a most amazing spectacle. The light came from an immense chamber on the other side of the glass. It was a compartment

nearly a hundred feet square, filling the heart of the cube. The room was so high that the ceiling was hidden in obscurity and the lamps which illuminated the floor were placed high in the open space above.

WITHOUT removing his gaze from the interior, the doctor reached out his hand and dragged me to him.

"Do you see her?" he demanded.

"See what?" I asked, and then as my eyes slowly became accustomed to the light I stared in breathless silence.

Face down upon a marble floor, within ten feet of the glass against which we crouched, was the body of a woman. Although I watched her for a long minute there was no sign of movement.

"Dead?" I asked.

The doctor shook his head. "Only fainted, I believe. Fainted with joy and surprize when she saw me. I couldn't wait for you; something called silently to me from the inside. I could feel it pulling and tugging against my wish to keep my promise. Finally I gave in and started through the tunnel. When I reached the wall here, she was sitting there beside the table. I tapped lightly on the glass and she turned her head and saw me. Without a sound that I could hear through this confounded wall, she threw up her arms and collapsed on the floor. Shock, I imagine.

"I shouted and called, but she didn't move. Then I heard footsteps behind me and guessed that it was you. What shall we do?"

"I don't know," I replied. "Maybe she will recover and let us in. Did you try to find a door?"

He shook his head. "No. I was too excited. Let us look for it."

We easily found a door, but searched in vain for a latch or keyhole. The transparent block was fastened with two immense hinges, and on the other side was a heavy bolt made of the same glasslike sub-

stance, but there was no sign of a catch on our side. Obviously the door was made to be opened only from the chamber.

"Step back," I ordered, and swung forward my rifle. "I'm going to blow off the bolt."

"I wouldn't do it, Dana," cautioned the doctor. "See, the door is hermetically sealed. The air here is fairly pure, but it may have leaked in from our own terrestrial atmosphere. The air inside—Dana, it may not be air at all. Suppose our visitor doesn't breathe oxygen. You may cause her death."

At that moment, the figure on the floor moved slightly, then turned on its side. I could see her face!

She was a brunette, tall for a woman and thin now from privation and hardship. Her face was wan and tired-looking but of an unearthly beauty that men imagine only in their dreams. Her lashes were heavy and black and so long that her short, probably bobbed, hair seemed scarcely longer. Her hands and feet were tiny but perfectly formed, while her long, supple fingers, even in their relaxed condition, radiated artistic ability and grace. Her lips were slightly parted, and as we watched breathlessly they compressed into a straight line of pain and suffering.

I could wait no longer. "Doctor," I repeated, "I've got to try it. While we stand here impotent, she is suffering, possibly dying. Get back."

Without waiting for an answer, I shoved forward the rifle, took careful aim at the transparent bolt, and fired. The crash in the narrow enclosed space was deafening. Without waiting to see what had happened, I fired again and yet again. Then, clubbing my rifle, I struck savagely with the butt against the glass. It gave. Slowly at first, and then more rapidly, the door swung on its heavy hinges and a delicate perfumed atmosphere swept out to meet us. I sighed in gratitude. The compartment contained air!

Hesitating only for a second to discover whether the room contained other occupants, I knelt down beside the girl and turned her gently over on her back. As I did so, her lashes raised and I gazed for the first time into her eyes. They were gray, deep and fathomless as the autumn skies, and proud. As I stared at her, I saw in their hidden depths a mounting gladness and surprize. With a little sigh, she lapsed into unconsciousness. I felt her pulse. It was weak but regular.

Dr. Frelinghusen knelt down and examined her with deft professional fingers.

"She will be all right in a few minutes," he concluded finally. "All that she needs is sunlight and fresh air."

"We will soon give her that," I said, "provided we can find our way out of this place."

"Give me just a minute, please," said the doctor. "We must look around. Perhaps the cube contained other occupants. Surely she would not have come alone."

I picked up the girl tenderly and carried her over to one of the two couches the chamber contained. In my arms she felt fragile and light, delicate as a rapier is delicate, yet capable of amazing endurance.

"Dana," called the doctor, "come here a moment, please."

I saw that he was bending over the other couch and hurried to his side. Covered only with a sheet, the body of an old man lay outstretched before us, his hands folded on his breast. From the first glance I knew that he was dead.

Dr. Frelinghusen bent over the body and then straightened. "He has been dead for years, Dana," he said. "Look, the body has been carefully embalmed." He pulled back the loose robe to show me, and we both started in surprize. High up on the right breast was a deep wound,

evidently made by some sharply pointed weapon, probably a knife.

I searched the calm, noble features of the dead face and then turned to look at the unconscious girl. There was an obvious and easily noticeable resemblance. Each possessed the same long, oval face, the same delicate, sensitive nostrils and the same high forehead. It was an easy guess that they were father and daughter.

"Come," said the doctor, "there is nothing that we can do here."

We made a swift but hurried examination of the compartment. As I have stated, it was almost square in shape, approximately a hundred feet each way, and so high that we could not see the ceiling. At one end were a series of knobs and controls, together with a huge mechanism which filled in nearly the whole hundred feet of wall space. The apparatus resembled nothing so much as the control room of a submarine, except that the dials, levers and controllers were of unusual shape and design. I judged this to be the mechanism used to soften the fall of the cube and perhaps to open the doors as well.

Beside the controller boards was a desk on which lay an open book. The doctor gave it a hasty glance and then thrust the volume under his arm. Rows of somewhat similar books filled several long shelves near by.

A small room adjoining the main compartment had evidently been used for a provision room, as the floor was littered with many empty metallic cartons, while stacks of others, as yet unopened, lined the walls. I picked up one of them and found it filled with small cubes somewhat resembling the ones used here for bouillon and condensed soups.

A MOAN from the adjoining room recalled us to the main compartment. The girl had passed from her faint into a deep and troubled slumber. Her brows knit fiercely and she struggled and twitched as if to throw

off a heavy and depressing weight. Gazing at her, we visioned the terrific strain of the days and years which she had endured as a prisoner in a living tomb beside the body of her father. I marveled that it had been possible for any human being to live and stay sane through such tribulations.

"Come," said the doctor. "We have waited too long."

I took the girl into my arms and we prepared to leave the cube.

"What about him?" I asked, nodding at the body of the old man.

"We must leave him," said the doctor. "The cube may well become his final resting-place. I can think of none more fit."

Without another word we left the chamber. Glancing back as we passed through the door and down the corridor, I caught a last glimpse of the compartment, its immensity and its sadness. A faint air current from nowhere ruffled slightly the white shroud which we had replaced over the body of the old man. Over all hung an atmosphere of quiet and dignified sorrow. It seemed to me that the hidden lights which illuminated the room were already becoming a trifle dim.

The doctor shut behind us the glass door and we left him to his rest.

"I have a theory about this current," remarked the doctor, as we passed the line of non-conducting substance and felt again around us the ebb and flow of the unseen force. "It has just occurred to me at this instant. I believe that it is a part of the force which was used to break the fall of the cube. A variety of repellent electro-magnetism of which we know little here on earth. It is my theory that the entire cube, being of iron, was magnetized highly just before it entered the earth's atmosphere from the outer depths of space and that this magnetism served as a repellent force to ease the fall.

"By the passage of time, since the

cube landed, most of the force has undoubtedly been dissipated, but some remnant clings to the metal with enough strength to be felt.

"I also believe," he added, "that before the shock of arrival the compartment was much higher in the cube. Some method must have been employed to break the interior shock which, no matter how lightly the cube landed, necessarily was great. I will wager that the entire interior of the cube is hollow and once constituted an immense air cushion."

"Perhaps some day you may be able to prove your theories," I suggested.

"Perhaps," he replied, "although I doubt if we shall ever have the opportunity. Haven't you forgotten something?"

As he asked the question we passed across the darkness line and the force of the current left us. At the entrance where there should have been bright daylight there was now but a faint glow. I shifted the body of the girl slightly in my arms and hurried forward. At the mouth of the tunnel, we stopped in surprise.

We had evidently passed many hours in the depths of the cube. When we entered, it could not have been later than noon, but now it was practically night. Ahead of us, scarcely a quarter of a mile away, gleamed a forgotten lamplight from our cabin.

The doctor repeated his question in another form. "Has it escaped your memory, Dana, that today, or rather tonight, is quite an important date?"

I stared at him stupidly.

"What do you mean?"

"Today," he said, "was the 25th of July, 1925. Four years ago today the cube in which"—he gestured at the girl in my arms—"in which we found this young lady, arrived within the atmospheric limits of the earth. And tonight"—he paused to emphasize his remark—"tonight another cube is scheduled to arrive and we

shall very probably not survive the shock of impact."

"You mean," I asked, staring down at the girl, "that we have rescued her only to die?"

The doctor strode ahead of me into the darkness. "It looks very much that way," he replied dryly.

As if to furnish her own answer to my question, the girl stirred in my arms. As I looked down at her, the thought of our mutual destruction seemed incredible, impossible. Life was suddenly very desirable and full of possibilities. I now had something, for the first time in my life, to care for and to cherish. I could not believe that destiny had allowed me to find her only to lose her at once. It would be too unfair.

The doctor looked at his watch. "It is now 7 o'clock," he stated. "By our calculations we have some three and a half hours before the impact. I had planned on retiring to the edge of the plateau before then, although even there our danger would be great. However, with the girl a movement of any distance is not to be thought of. In her exhausted condition it would certainly kill her."

"You might go alone," I suggested.

We had arrived at the cabin and he stepped across the threshold and turned down the covers on his cot for my burden before replying.

"You know better than to say that, Dana," he said.

I did indeed. The old doctor thought too much of me and had too much courage within his own spare body for desertion of a friend. It would be the two of us together until the end. No, not two: there would be three of us. I looked down at the bed to find the gray eyes of the girl wide open and staring at me unbelievably.

It was then she spoke, and for the first time I heard the liquid, melodic tones which have haunted me, asleep or awake, forever after. The syllables which she uttered have escaped me now, but at the time it was enough

that she spoke. I do remember that I held her hands and whispered soft nothings into her ear while the doctor busied himself in preparing a cup of tea and some soup. She accepted the refreshments gratefully and thanked us softly in words which, although unintelligible to us, seemed to fit the situation perfectly.

When she had finished, she passed her hands lightly before her eyes to show that she was weary. Covering her over with a blanket, we left her to rest as we prepared our dinner.

While we were eating, we discussed in low tones the probable happenings of the night and what precautions, if any, could be taken to insure our safety. We at last decided that nothing could be done and that our lives depended upon the distance between ourselves and the point of impact.

"It will be all luck," remarked the doctor. "If the cube arrives—and I believe it will—the heat will probably kill us if the shock doesn't."

"And is there nothing that we can do?"

"Nothing except hope—and pray if you believe in prayers."

The soft voice sounded again in our ears and we turned to discover the girl sitting erect on her cot. With rare intelligence she appreciated the uselessness of her language in the present situation and immediately resorted to the sign symbols of a forgotten era. Pointing to the sky, she mutely asked us a question.

"What does she mean?" asked the doctor.

Seeing that we did not comprehend, she arose from her cot and, swaying slightly, walked to the solitary window of the cabin. We sprang to her assistance and reinforced her strength with our own.

THE moon had risen through a faint cloud of vapor but there was sufficient light from its rays to distinguish objects on the plateau. Anxiously, the girl counted the giant cubes in the

little valley and we, watching, noted her lightened expression when she discovered that the blocks numbered only seven.

Then she turned to us and repeated her former expressive gesture.

"Dana," gasped Dr. Frelinghusen, "I believe she is trying to ask us when the next sky visitor will arrive." Pointing at the sky, he swept his finger downward in a straight line until it was directed at the one vacant spot in the circle of metallic giants. Then he imitated as well as he could the girl's expression of questioning.

To our great surprize and relief, she behaved as if she understood, and nodded.

The doctor pulled out his watch. It was then 10 o'clock. Swiftly he pointed out the space on the dial between the hour and 10:45. He then repeated his gesture at the heavens.

The girl watched for an interval the swiftly moving hands on the dial and then evidently comprehended, for her face changed quickly from interest to excitement and then to stark terror. Pushing aside our restraining hands, she opened the cabin door and ran outside.

Following, we watched her gaze search the heavens anxiously as if fearful of what she might behold. Then she turned to us and we saw that she had regained control of herself. The soft lips had tightened into a single straight line while the gray eyes sparkled and flashed.

The fear was vanished and in its place we saw anger—a terrible anger which frightened us by its fearful vindictiveness. For an instant forgetful of our presence, she turned her face to the heavens and from those tender lips poured forth a flood of words—eager, wrathful, courageous words. Her tones were now as harsh and threatening as before they had been melodious.

"Dana," whispered the doctor, "I believe she is swearing vengeance to-

ward those who are to come. Did you ever experience such hate?"

"Possibly," I hazarded, "those who are coming are those who killed her father and sent her adventuring alone through space."

Although I had spoken the words softly, by some intuition she understood and turned toward me, nodding sadly. Her anger had vanished, leaving behind it only a saddened and despairing woman. It was clear that she had nearly reached the breaking-point and was ready now for human sympathy and companionship. We offered her our outstretched hands.

She met us half-way, one hand held out to each of us. The doctor took her in his arms, and she sobbed brokenly upon his shoulder, suddenly transformed into a queer, forlorn, approachable little person who needed us.

The doctor comforted and soothed her while I went back into the cabin for a blanket to throw around her lightly clad shoulders. When I returned, we sat down in the shadow of the nearest cube, three adventurers waiting for what fate might bring to us. The girl curled up beside me in seeming content, and when I offered her my coat for a cushion, she thanked me in that soft low voice of hers.

None of us wanted to be shut indoors to miss what was coming. As I look back now on the mad happenings of that moonlit night in the Andes, it seems to me that we anticipated our adventure with eager courage and gay foolhardiness. At any rate, we settled ourselves calmly to view a sight the like of which had probably never before been seen by man—and we did it with as much nonchalance as though we were to witness a performance of the opera.

WE HAD not long to wait. During the last few minutes the mist overhead had thickened until the moon, air messenger of cheeriness and hope, had given up the struggle

and hidden away behind the encroaching clouds.

I looked at my watch. It was 10:40 p. m.

"I don't imagine we shall see much of it, until the cube is very near," said the doctor. "Perhaps we shall never see it at all. If we don't, here's good luck, Dana." He held out his hand, which I shook gravely, unconscious at the moment of the opera bouffé character of our performance. The girl, also, seemed to enter into the spirit of the occasion and sedately offered her hand to each of us in turn. The doctor shook it heartily, but I retained it, conscious even at that intense moment of a current which strangely vibrated between us, a magnetic current which told subtly of good cheer and a promise of what was to come.

"Dana," cried the doctor, "it is coming. Look!"

The heavens above us were becoming illuminated, slowly changing their customary blackness for a soft vibrant shade of green. The color was comparable to nothing except the burning of copper metal in a white-hot flame. Reflected from cloud to cloud, the rays at last struck the ground and our faces, giving the whole locality an unearthly greenish tinge.

As we watched, the green color swiftly faded. I looked at my watch. It was 10:44 p. m.

"Something is wrong," muttered the doctor. "If the cube had entered the atmosphere it should be here now, unless they have slowed it even more than——"

Even as he spoke, the light appeared again, this time reddish in shade. Swiftly it deepened, increased in power, lightened the entire sky, changed quickly to pink, to white, to an overpowering dazzling white, then became more powerful, more dazzling, incandescent, white-hot.

"It's here, Dana! It's here!" screamed the doctor. "Give me your hand; we will try to stay together."

Swiftly I caught the woman to me and reached for his arm.

At the same instant, it struck.

A world arose in torment and overwhelmed us. Somewhere, as if in a vision, I have a memory of a vague shape, a thousand furnaces magnified, hovering just over our heads. Then the light became too strong and blinded me.

It seemed years before we felt the shock. I was conscious first of swift winds that picked us up and whirled us with terrific force as tiny gnats caught in an air whirlpool are tossed beside a flame. Then came a crash as of a thousand railroad trains crashing together head on—a deafening, ear-splitting crash that swallowed our lives, dissected and ended us.

As I passed into darkness I was still vaguely conscious of the feminine figure clasped tightly against my breast. I remember that even then I was glad to finish—so.

Followed a long, endless interval of utter blankness.

I RECOVERED my senses with a snap as if a chord somewhere had come back into tune. I was lying flat on my face in a sea of mud while a driving, unreal rain pelted my head and shoulders. Under me was the body of the girl, protected even to the end. I looked for the body of the doctor. It was nowhere in sight. Nothing could be seen of the cabin, which had been only a little distance away.

I staggered to my feet and took my bearings from the newly arrived cube. It had landed precisely in the vacancy left in the circle of iron monsters. From its location, I guessed the direction of the cabin.

For the second time in that day of incredible strain and tender emotions, I picked up the girl, held her close in my arms and staggered up the torn and littered pathway. All things were changed. The creek which previously had meandered between us and the cabin had now disappeared,

leaving only its tortuous course to indicate that it had ever existed. The air was filled with the smell of molten iron, that close unwholesome odor experienced only in the vicinity of huge foundries. Beating down constantly upon us was the rain, in itself a phenomenon at that season.

A hissing sound filled the air, long-drawn and vibrant, as a giant snake hisses when aroused to deadly anger and fear. It was occasioned, I saw, by the cooling rain striking against the hot iron of the eighth projectile, the surface of which was already turning black. Above us in the heavens, mighty winds yet blew wildly, enraged perhaps at the intruder which had passed through them unscathed. Small fires here and there fought vainly against the rain which was remorselessly extinguishing them. As yet they gave sufficient light to illuminate the scene.

I was past all feeling or caring. All I knew was that somewhere ahead of me was a possible shelter from the elements and that I must reach it before my senses again left me. Luckily the distance was not far, or I should never have made it.

Seen by the fitful glare of the occasional flames, the cabin appeared not badly damaged. One corner of the roof was partly wrecked, but aside from that it was almost untouched. Its lack of height and the solid manner in which it had been built combined to save it.

I placed the girl on her cot and knelt down beside her. I believed that she was dead, and in the anguish of the moment buried my head in the fold of her dress and sobbed in my despair. We were so futile, two tiny insects combating a strange and cruel antagonist. We two against a universe enraged.

After a time, the spell passed. I remembered the doctor and raised myself wearily to my feet, intending to search for his body. Caught as he was in the tumult of the night's

furies, it never occurred to me that he might have escaped.

As I reached the door, however, I saw him coming up the path, a wavering black shadow careening from side to side.

"Thank God you are safe, Dana!" he said. "We three have witnessed a miracle this night."

I nodded wearily. "Yes, Doctor, but I am afraid that where there were three of us, there are only two remaining. Come and look."

"Nonsense. If two of us could come through that inferno, why not three of us? Let me look at her."

I stood aside and waited in silence as he made his examination.

"Pshaw," he said, "you have been imagining things. A few hours' rest and she will be as good as ever. She was created fortunate." And he smoothed the dark hair away from her face with a tenderness that I had never dreamed he possessed. "Leave her alone, Dana," he ordered, "and get some sleep yourself. I am too old to care for two patients."

I listened to his orders, and despite myself was forced to strip off my wet clothing and relax upon the other cot. The rain, occasioned I suspected by the atmospheric disturbance in the same manner as similar rains were caused by constant cannonading in France, beat fiercely against the walls.

My last memory before sleep overcame me was a picture of the doctor, his white hairs all awry and his clothes dripping with water, as he concentrated with customary self-forgetfulness upon the curiously shaped book which he had plundered, how long ago it seemed, from the cabin of the seventh cube only that afternoon.

As I fell asleep, I had a vague memory of his face. It was stamped with an expression of great wonder and a glorious air of surprize. Idly, I wondered what he had discovered.

After that I remember no more.

I dreamed of the Chinese torture of the falling water, a horrible dream wherein I was bound fast in an immense carved chair with my head forced back by silken strands so that a sweet-smelling liquid fell drop by drop in deadening regularity upon a certain spot on my forehead. Hour after hour it continued, monotonous and nerve-racking as it sapped my will and my sanity. I strove to move my head even a fraction of an inch. It was impossible. I screamed long and loud. From somewhere near by came a tinkling laugh as of tiny silver bells.

I wakened, instinctively aware that I had made an ass of myself. The rain, which had strengthened into a steady downpour, at last had found a passageway through the thatch overhead and was falling in evenly timed drops upon my forehead. It was morning. Shamefaced, I sat up to meet the quizzical gray eyes of my lady of the cube.

"Come, Dana," sounded the voice of the doctor behind me, "breakfast is ready and I need your help."

IT WAS difficult to think of eating after the unreal and impossible events we had passed through. In spite of myself, as I dressed I stole a glance through the broken window-frame to find out whether the events of the night had really taken place or whether they existed only in my imagination.

The soil of the valley was torn and tossed about from the force of the convulsion. In a great circle stood the iron monstrosities, their sides sleek and glittering in the downpour. I counted them. There were eight. It was all true then!

From the eighth cube a faint wisp of smoke yet arose, to be driven away and dissipated by the rain. It seemed impossible to realize that it had really arrived from a port unknown during the night.

The doctor's voice sounded again behind me and I stopped my pondering to hurry into the other room. As I went, I whistled merrily. After all, it was over and we had escaped. Life seemed very good.

An anxious and feverishly drawn expression on the face of Dr. Frelinghusen partly sobered me.

"Hurry, Dana," he said; "there is much to be done."

I saw at once that the night had been a sleepless one for him and wondered what it was he had discovered that so worried him.

"Breakfast first, then business," he declared, interrupting my half-spoken question. In spite of our anxiety and the strangeness of the girl to everything, for the doctor and me the meal was an amusing one.

Our customs to her were doubtless bizarre and unusual, but she adapted herself with an ease which made the strangeness scarcely noticeable. I did observe surreptitiously that she disdained meat and the heavy brown bread which was the principal article of our diet but satisfied herself with tropical fruits, vegetables and water. A light wine which the doctor served was tasted and then courteously ignored.

Breakfast over, the doctor summoned us into executive council before his work desk.

"In the first place," he said, "I want to introduce you to Miss-ah"—and he turned to his notes—"Miss Aien—" He stopped abruptly. The girl's face had colored excitedly and she flung herself at him with a torrent of words. Without attempting to reply, he motioned her to a chair.

"Miss Aien," he continued, "is, or rather was, the daughter of a citizen, an inventor I might say, of a world somewhere in space. Where it is and what are the customs I do not know. Perhaps we shall never know until she tells us herself."

"Dr. Frelinghusen," I interrupted, "tell me how you know her name

and where she is from and all the rest of it."

The old doctor smiled. It was his moment of triumph.

"Dana," he said, "the log book of the seventh cube tells the entire story. See here!" He exhibited the curiously shaped volume which he had carried away under his arm. "During the night I deciphered part of it. How I did it is of no importance at this time. It is enough that I succeeded.

"As I was saying before you interrupted me, Aien's father was an inventor. He was the originator of those——" He pointed largely toward the monsters outside. "The world in which they lived, as far as I have been able to interpret the diary, was a very old world, a very old world indeed—perhaps much like this earth as it will be a hundred million years or more from now, when most of the atmosphere has seeped away into space, when the rivers have run dry and the earth heat is cooling so rapidly that life is becoming impossible.

"The father, according to his diary, was the hope of a dying planet—or world; perhaps it was not a planet. At least it is true that he was the genius on which a race was relying to save them from extinction. In his invention they saw a possibility of escape, a way to transport at least a part of their population to a new world and escape death, the inevitable end.

"Therefore, over a long period of time—just how long I am unable to ascertain—they supported his experiments at government expense. For their failing energies it must have been a tremendous effort. Year after year the experiments continued and at last were successful in that a series of cubes were, at favorable intervals, dispatched from their world and landed upon ours; successfully landed, that is, arriving so lightly that living beings might

reasonably hope to occupy the projectiles and not be killed by the shock.

"Everything was ready for an attempted interplanetary invasion of this earth—an invasion of a world of immigrants. How they knew that the earth was habitable, I don't know, but evidently they had discovered enough facts about us to lead them to believe that it was.

"Of course during the progress of these experiments there had been jealousy, ignorance and fear for the old inventor to fight—jealousy on the part of rival inventors, ignorance on the part of the great mass of the people which, as on our own planet, were necessarily far below their leaders in intelligence.

"But greater even than these difficulties was the overpowering necessity for haste—a haste made necessary because their world was swiftly dying and even the leaders had begun to be panic-stricken. It was this last factor which proved the inventor's undoing.

"Everything was ready for the last test projectile to be dispatched containing a picked crew of men who were to be the advance guard of a people. At the last moment something, I don't know what, happened. According to the diary, there was a riot, the picked crew was ordered out and a group of cowardly political leaders attempted to take their place and save their own skins.

"Somehow, in the turmoil, the old inventor and his daughter succeeded in getting inside the cube and commenced the voyage alone. This, however, did not happen until the father had received a serious stab wound. He must have died en route, and, alone in the cube, Aien embalmed his body. Probably he died so suddenly that he was unable to give her directions for opening the doors to the outside world, and she faced a living death here in this valley for four

(Continued on page 428)

The City of Iron Cubes

(Continued from page 324)

long years. At last, frightened to desperation, she must have done something which opened the doors. Is it not so, Aien?" He leaned forward affectionately to pat her hand.

I had become so absorbed in his story of the happenings on that far-away world that I had lost track of the happenings in our immediate vicinity. Which, perhaps, accounts for the fact that it was not until he had finished the tale that I realized that for the past few minutes a faint hissing sound had been piercing the partly wrecked walls of the cabin. It was a sound as of a giant blow-torch cutting through metal. Although I had heard it only once before, I was sure that my faculties interpreted it correctly.

Across the valley, the last visitors from beyond the stars were cutting their way out!

A IEN and the professor became conscious of the disturbance nearly at the same instant, and we all rushed to the tiny window, straining our eyes to behold the fierce cutting flame which we knew must be there. Even from our distant position it was easy to see that our suspicions were well founded. As we watched, the flame completed its chiseling through the iron wall of the eighth cube and the heated metal fell outward to clang brazenly against the earth.

"Will they be friendly, do you think, Doctor?" I whispered. "Or will it be—otherwise?"

"I don't know," he replied, "but from the attitude of our visitor I should believe—otherwise."

Her head bowed between her shoulders, Aien was staring hopelessly at the black hole in the side of the cube. In her attitude was de-

jection so complete and absolute that one felt she had abandoned all hope. I have seen soldiers stand so when alone and friendless they faced an overwhelming rush of gray-clad, bayonet-waving figures.

Not knowing definitely what to fear, I could not give up so easily. "How much time will we have?" I asked.

He shook his head. "I don't know. It is possible that they may not discover us until night. It depends on how many there are of them.

"You stay here and care for Aien," he ordered. "I have something that must be done at once." And without wasting further time he left us, descending, I noticed, through a trap-door in the floor of the cabin which had previously escaped my attention.

We were alone, Aien and I; alone, that is, with the exception of the black hole which yawned in the side of the metal mountain a scant half-mile away. Hoping to arouse her from her despondency, I took her by the hand and gently twisted her away from the window.

The gray eyes which stared into my own were abstracted and fixed.

"Aien, Aien," I entreated her, "what does it matter? Come, look at me?" I placed my hands on her shoulders and bent my head nearly to a level with her eyes. Automatically, she became aware of the contact of my hands and shrugged her shoulders to throw them off.

I shook her gently as one chastises a friend. Instantly she responded and her expression grew proud and haughty. For an interval our glances clashed like two rivers of molten steel meeting in a single fiery channel. The gray eyes became suddenly

more fierce and then, as I did not relax my grasp, grew scornful.

Yet I would not loosen the clasp of my hands on her shoulders. Indeed I could not if I would. Between us the invisible magnetic current of life pulsed fiercely. I knew that despite herself she must feel it even as I.

For an instant she struggled frantically while I, scarce knowing what I was doing, drew her toward me. Then she relaxed, and, imprisoned in my arms, ceased to fight.

It was the relaxation which brought me to my senses. It was incredible. I had met her but a few short hours ago and now—I knew that in another second I must have kissed her.

I released her, and bowing my head humbly murmured, "I beg your pardon," forgetful that my language was meaningless to her. Yet I think she understood, perhaps from my attitude, for her scornful glance melted and her hand sought my own to clasp it for a brief second ere it dropped away. Then we turned to the cube, I, for one, careless of what might have happened during our period of abstraction. At least I knew she had forgiven me.

I reached for a pair of field glasses and focused them upon the entrance. Together we waited for what was to take place.

IT MUST have been at least a half-hour before we noticed any movement. Then a man appeared in the entrance with his hand shading his eyes from the fierce glare of the sunlight. For a long minute he stood there, framed in the metal doorway, and I wondered what were his thoughts. It must have been a marvelous sensation to be the first to look upon a new and strange world, a world which was awaiting a conqueror; to be the first to step from space upon the soil of an unknown land. Dangerous he might be, and

an eternal enemy, but I envied him the glory of that single instant.

Even as we watched, it was over; for with a graceful movement he raised his hand high overhead in silent salute. Then he turned and vanished into the interior.

I turned back to the cabin and secured a rifle and a bandolier of shells. It was as well to be prepared for whatever might take place.

When I returned to the window a file of men were pouring from the entranceway. They wore tight-fitting clothes of an unusual and virtually invisible shade of gray. Under the arm of each man was a long tube, shaped somewhat like a rifle, but with a barrel two or three times the size. Although I was ignorant of its purpose, I assumed it to be a weapon.

Apparently all had received their orders beforehand; for, without a sound that we could hear, they formed into little groups of three or four and disappeared into the surrounding territory. Following them were other men, dozens of them, who behaved in the same startling manner. I could admire them for their skill and the ability with which they performed the maneuver even while I feared for what their near approach might mean to us.

The strangers who were leaving the cube now were no longer armed, but instead carried tools; strange tools of an inconceivable utility. These men were workers, not fighters. Even as I watched, they commenced the assembling of a huge and unwieldy apparatus in an open space before the cube. They worked swiftly and with a minimum of orders, each man performing some particular task. A group of head engineers or overseers left the cube next and stopped to watch the assembling. From their reserved and dignified appearance it was not difficult to deduce that they were the chiefs of the enterprise, whatever it might be.

In a few minutes the scouts began to report back. A drab figure would arise from the earth as a veritable shadow-man materializing from nothingness. The scout would incline his head briefly, speak a few words and vanish as he had come.

A few minutes later two soldiers, for such these men must be, came into view carrying between them a burden wrapped in a white cloth. I looked quickly at Aien. To me the nature of their burden was obvious at once. They had discovered the entrance to the seventh cube, had penetrated to the interior and were carrying the corpse of the old inventor.

Aien was regarding the scene with interest, and with a trace of fear, but there was no indication that she had guessed the contents of the white-wrapped package.

The leaders were watching the approaching soldiers with intense curiosity. As I watched, one of them stepped forward and directed the scouts to lay down their burden. He stared into the face of the shrouded figure and then, to my disgust, spat upon the uncovered features.

Then he evidently asked the guard a question, for the fellow shook his head in negation. A commotion at the entrance to the cube temporarily distracted my attention. They were bringing out a man, obviously a prisoner, for his hands were bound behind him.

At the orders of the leader, they led the captive across the open space to confront him with the corpse. He stared at the dead features and then started in surprize and grief. Then he stood with drooping head as before. His attitude and indifference appeared to enrage the leader, for he motioned back the guards and advanced upon the prisoner.

Aien, whom I had disregarded in my excitement, chose that moment to pluck me by the sleeve and mutely

request the loan of my glasses. Foolishly I gave them to her.

The man, as I could see with my naked eye, was regarding the approaching leader with an air of defiant hopelessness. So quickly it occurred that I had scarcely time to gasp before the lean hands of the leader closed around the throat of the captive and throttled him before our very eyes!

Aien screamed, dropped the glasses and bolted for the door. I sprang after her and caught her on the threshold. For a moment we fought fiercely before I succeeded in dragging her back to the safety of the room. Seemingly bent upon attempting a rescue of the man attacked, she fought as one demented, and it required my entire strength to subdue her. Then she collapsed on the floor, sobbing and crying in despair.

The earth chose that moment to turn and twist under our feet. Instantly I thought of the arrival of another cube and then realized that this time it was a true earth tremor. The entire floor of the plateau shifted and settled. The shock was not a bad one, but, combined with the affair of the night before, it was sufficient to complete the wrecking of our roof. Before I had time to move, the entire expanse of heavy thatch sagged drunkenly and collapsed on our heads. I was caught, pinned down beneath the wreckage.

Strangely enough I felt no pain, although I had been felled to the ground by the initial blow. I realized that the force of the fall had been broken by the stout wooden table which stood in the center of the room and that, unless the tremor increased in force, we were safe from further harm.

But what had become of the doctor and Aien?

In much less time than it takes to tell all this, the quake passed and I heard it rumbling away, echoing and re-echoing into the circle of moun-

tains surrounding us. I struggled fiercely to free myself but found that my strength was insufficient. Forgetful of the necessity for silence, I shouted again and again.

A queer feeling that someone was watching me at last silenced my cries.

The resulting quiet was uncanny. I endeavored to twist my head to one side in an effort to see what had impressed me. The effort was futile. I was pinned fast as though held in a vise.

Moved into my circle of vision moved a pair of legs. They were strange legs and I was sure that they belonged neither to Aien nor the professor. They were gray-clad, the very color worn by the shadow-scouts. Back and forth they moved before my eyes, and then, as their owner stepped back to catch a better view, I saw him in his entirety.

It was indeed one of the enemy—a spare man of medium height and with cold, cruel eyes. Seeing that I was conscious, he addressed several words to me. I shook my head to show that I did not understand. He leaned his weapon against the wall and strode across the room to me.

So, after all, they are going to be friendly, I thought, as he knelt down beside me. It was only when his long, narrow fingers closed around my throat that I remembered the fate of the strange prisoner. So it was to be that! Of course in a world which was perishing through lack of air, strangulation would be the most cruel death.

Gently, almost lovingly, the fingers tightened around my throat. My breath was cut off. Everything turned black. It was so easy to die! As from a great distance I was aware of an explosion. The hands around my throat relaxed and I lapsed into a cool and quiet unconsciousness.

The catastrophe, and the astounding secret of the origin of the men from the iron cubes, will be related in the concluding chapters of this story in next month's WEIRD TALES.

Weird Tales

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FARNSWORTH WRIGHT, Editor.

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Contents for April, 1929

- Cover Design Hugh Rankin
Illustrating a scene in "The Devil's Rosary"
- Neptune's Neighbors Cristel Hastings 436
Verse
- The Devil's Rosary Seabury Quinn 437
Tibetan devil-worshippers play a thrilling part in this eerie tale of the French occultist, Jules de Grandin
- The World-Wrecker (Part 1) Arlton Eadie 455
A stirring three-part weird-scientific serial about a scientist who pulled the world from its position in the solar system
- In a Dead Man's Shoes Harold Markham 465
A story of Tyburn gallows and vengeance from beyond the grave—disaster seized the man who betrayed his friend
- Folks Used to Believe:
The Unicorn Alvin F. Harlow 472
One of the strange beliefs of our ancestors

[CONTINUED ON NEXT PAGE]

The Hermit of Chemeketa Mountain	Thomas de V. Harper	473
<i>A strange tale of anthropomorphism, and the fate that befell the man who investigated the hermit and his dogs</i>		
A Dinner at Imola	August W. Derleth	478
<i>Abandoning poison for once, Caesar Borgia took an unusual way to rid himself of an enemy</i>		
The Dunwich Horror	H. P. Lovecraft	481
<i>A colossal story of very happenings in a drab New England settlement—a tale of blood-chilling horror</i>		
The City of Iron Cubes (Conclusion)	H. F. Arnold	509
<i>A two-part weird-scientific story by the author of "The Night Wire"—strange invaders from space land in Peru</i>		
Up Irriwaddy Way	Lieutenant Edgar Gardiner	519
<i>A story of man-eating plants and giant fungus growths that attack human beings</i>		
The Goddess of the Painted Priests	Drury D. Sharp	532
<i>Down into the nest of venomous snakes and sparkling jewels she went, to the amazement of the Indian priests</i>		
Sonnet	Clark Ashton Smith	442
<i>Verse</i>		
The Damsel and Her Cat	David H. Keller	543
<i>The high-born maiden lay in a deathlike swoon, but outside the castle terrible things were happening</i>		
Weird Story Reprint:		
The Diamond Lens	Fitz-James O'Brien	547
<i>This was the first of the great weird-scientific stories, and it made its author famous</i>		
Moon Mockery	Robert E. Howard	562
<i>Verse</i>		
The Eyrie		563
<i>A chat with the readers</i>		

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The CITY of IRON CUBES

by H.F. Arnold



A Weird-Scientific Serial Story

The Story Thus Far

SEVEN huge black iron cubes have fallen on a certain plateau in Peru, at intervals of four years. Dr. Frelinghusen, the earthquake specialist, and his friend Dana, investigate the mysterious objects from outer space, and find in one of them a beautiful girl, named Aien, and the corpse of her father. Dr. Frelinghusen deciphers the diary of her father and finds that he had been a scientist on a dying world, who had invented the iron cubes to transport his people to Earth to save them from death. The first cubes had been shot out to learn whether they could be landed successfully on Earth. During a riot when the seventh cube was to start out with a picked crew, the old man and his daughter set out alone, the inventor dying en route. A large scouting party arrives in the eighth cube, and Aien's brother is strangled in sight of Aien, Dana and the doctor. The three hide from the gray-clad invaders from the cube, but Dana, pinned in the wreckage of the cabin during an earthquake, is being slowly strangled by one of the invaders, when he hears an explosion and lapses into unconsciousness.

WHEN I recovered my senses, I became aware that someone was bathing my forehead with water. It splashed in my eyes and ran down into my nostrils, choking me so that I gasped and sputtered.

"That's enough water: he is coming out of it," said a voice. I recognized

it as that of the doctor and wondered idly where he had come from. With an effort I fought off my drowsiness and attempted to sit up. A soft hand slipped behind my neck and aided me. It was Aien; a sorry-looking and troubled Aien with tear furrows showing through the caked dust on her face.

Her tears had been for me!

The realization acted more swiftly than any tonic, and in a few minutes I was sitting up. They had relieved me of the burden of debris which pinned me down.

"It was a close call, old boy," said the doctor, and then added grimly, "but it was a closer call for someone else."

He nodded significantly at a heap of rubbish beside the spot where I had been imprisoned. From a few scraps of curiously colored cloth, I identified the heap as the body of my

late antagonist. The corpse had been burned and nearly dissolved into nothingness by some unknown weapon. I looked questioningly at the doctor. He shook his head.

"No, it wasn't I. I fancy you can thank Aien for your life, Dana."

With his help I rose to my feet and walked over to where our visitor was standing. She was regarding the body of the shadow-man with scared, fascinated eyes. At my approach she looked up quickly, and then, burying her face in her hands, ran into the adjoining room. Behind her on the ground was the long, tubelike weapon which I remembered the scout had leaned against the wall as he started toward me.

"Where were you, Doctor?" I asked.

"I've been busy, Dana," he replied, "and just arrived above ground in time to see her aim the tube. There was a flash as of a condensed lightning bolt and then all was over. But tell me quickly what has happened here."

In a few words I related the happenings of the last few hours. When I had finished, he looked unusually grave and questioned me briefly about the apparatus which the invaders had been constructing. I told him as well as I could, and we moved over to where a gap in the wreckage gave us a clear view of the open space surrounding the cubes. Although it was now nearing dusk, the efforts of the workers were continuing with undiminished ardor. I doubted if even the temblor had distracted their attention for more than a few minutes.

In the interval since I had observed them last they had accomplished a seemingly incredible amount of work. In the open space before the cube an immense structure was now rearing itself into the sky. Steel cranes operating from doors half-way up the side of the cube swung huge masses of metal into place even as we

watched. As nearly as I can describe it, the edifice resembled nothing so much as a huge cylinder with one end open to the sky. It had a bowl some sixty feet in diameter and had reached a height already greater than that.

The doctor looked it over and whistled softly under his breath. "They're not losing any time, are they?" he queried. "It will soon be up to us to do something or it will be too late."

"What can we do?" I demanded. "In what way can we act? Three of us against at least a thousand, and we don't even know what they are trying to do."

"But I have a very good suspicion," said Dr. Frelinghusen. "Let us get something to eat first and then we will plan out a course of—I repeat it—a course of action."

We went into what had been the adjoining room before the temblor and there found Aien awaiting us. Although her eyes were dry I noticed that her lips quivered as we entered, and I judged it better not to say anything at the time about the events of the afternoon. Not daring to light a fire, we squatted in the ruins of our dwelling and consumed such food as could be eaten uncooked. While we satisfied our hunger I explained and enlarged on what we had seen early in the day.

"You say the prisoner acted grieved and sorrowful when he saw the body of the old man?" demanded the doctor when I reached that point in my narrative.

I answered in the affirmative.

"Then I believe that I can throw some light on that particular portion of the happenings of today, at least," he said. "The prisoner was excited because he saw the body of his own father. The man you saw murdered was undoubtedly Aien's own brother. No wonder she wanted to go to his rescue."

He reached over and patted her

shoulder as she sat beside us bravely attempting to choke down a few morsels of food, although she must have felt that every bite would strangle her.

"And how do you know that?" I demanded.

"From the diary again. In it the inventor often mentioned his son and assistant. I have been puzzled to account for his whereabouts, but the 'shadow-men,' as you call them, of course forced him to help in the construction of another cube and then made him come along to aid them in landing."

"And what else does your precious diary tell you?" I asked. "Does it tell you the purpose of all that?" And I waved my hand at the swift and never-ending activity on the plain before us.

"It does, indeed," he replied, "although I believe I would have guessed it even though it had not. But come, let us see how they are progressing and I will tell you about it."

NIGHT had descended upon the plateau even as we ate. Night but not darkness. From a score of vantage-points, powerful lights similar to those we had observed in the interior of the cube were focused upon the structure in the plain. A soft but penetrating glow bathed the whole area in the center of the ring of cubes.

"Do I need to enlighten you, Dana?" inquired the old man as we watched the work. "Doesn't the very shape and structure of the machinery suggest something to you?"

"It might be a big gun emplacement," I hazarded, "except that there is nothing to shoot at. It might be a telescope or a huge searchlight or almost anything."

"But the direction in which it is pointing! Man, can't you see that it is aimed at the sky?"

Intuition suggested to me a purpose. "You mean it is——"

"Precisely! Imagine, Dana, that you are back in the days of the World War. You are intending to seize enemy territory. What would you do first?"

"I would send out a scouting party, of course."

"Of course you would. You see before you a scouting party dispatched from a dying world. Now suppose that this party entered the enemy's territory and found conditions suitable for a grand attack; in this case suppose they discovered that the earth was habitable and free from fierce inhabitants. What is the next thing to do?"

"Obviously to send a messenger back to tell the forces to come on and consolidate the territory."

"But suppose a messenger isn't practicable. Let us say that the scouting party has traveled 100,000,000 miles at a speed greater than that of a falling body. What then?"

"Then I would use some other means of communication. Say wireless or a rocket or a flare."

"Precisely. My boy, your intelligence is rapidly becoming more and more acute. That is just what our friends, the enemy, are doing. You see before you a giant searchlight or flare which at the proper moment will be touched off, signaling to skilled observers with a battery of telescopes on another terrestrial body that our planet is ripe and ready for the picking. Can you imagine what will result?"

The probability was appalling. I visioned scores and hundreds of such cubes descending at random upon an unsuspecting world. I saw cities leveled as by a stroke of lightning. I saw armies wiped out over night by strange and unknown weapons. I dreamed of a world writhing in agony as it attempted vainly to fight off an overwhelming and implacable foe.

"Are you beginning to comprehend what we are up against?" asked the doctor. "Can you imagine the terror

and ruin and desolation facing our earth if these men succeed in their enterprise, gallant and adventurous as it may seem?"

I nodded, feeling of my sore and torn throat as I did so. I felt small sympathy for our "gallant" adversaries.

"Our earth is already becoming overcrowded," continued the doctor. "Can you imagine it filled with the teeming millions of a desperate and alien race—a race that is facing extinction at home and is fighting with its back to the wall? Do you understand what we are combating, Dana?"

I did indeed understand, but the situation appeared hopeless. What could we do? How could we interfere with destiny?

I started to voice my query when Aien's hand clamped down across my lips. Uninterested in and not understanding our conversation, she had been devoting more attention to her surroundings than had the rest of us. Now, in the darkness, I knew that she had heard or seen something. What?

I touched the professor on the arm and felt that he understood. We three sat motionless with our eyes and ears strained to catch the slightest movement or sound.

After a long time, I heard a slight eliek as though metal had rasped against stone. Our senses strained to the utmost, we sat peering into the darkness. Then a shadow flitted past us and paused to peer at the wreck of our hut. I raised my rifle and covered it but was conscious of the restraining hand of the doctor against my arm.

"For God's sake, Dana, don't shoot," he cautioned. "You will ruin everything if you do."

Motionless we waited, and after an endless interval of breathless silence the shadow moved on.

"He will be back sooner or later," whispered the doctor, "and there will be others with him. They are search-

ing for their lost companion and I believe they are suspicious of the cabin. It means that we must act tonight."

"Act?" I repeated in exasperation. "How can we act? We are three against a thousand. The most we can hope for is to escape with our lives."

"We may not accomplish even that much," he said, "but at least we can try. Wait for me here. I am going into the cave under the cabin. While you are waiting, get together such provisions as we three can carry. Get rifles and canteens for the three of us. Whatever you do, make no noise."

Halting my question with a wave of his arm, he hauled up the trapdoor and disappeared into the darkness, leaving me nothing to do but obey his commands. Luckily, our supplies were grouped closely together and had escaped the fall of the roof, so that I had little difficulty in assembling the three packs. Water was not plentiful, but I succeeded in filling three canteens from the pail we had brought in only that morning.

Sensing my preparations, Aien aided me, and after a few minutes of united efforts we found ourselves outfitted as well as we could be for the unknown perils which lay before us.

Unable to do anything further, we sat down on the floor within arm's reach of the trap and waited for the return of the doctor. He was absent for an interminable period. The hour grew later and later. Three times the threatening shadows of the enemy approached our hiding-place so closely that I feared we were discovered. I was confident that out in the night a silent but persistent watch was being kept over the ruins of the cabin.

Aien, beside me, fairly quivered with excitement, and despite the almost constant strain of the past few days—a strain which would have crushed any earth woman—I felt sure she would play her part bravely during what was to come. She was a true

comrade, uncomplaining and unafraid, despite the myriad dangers which encompassed us. I wondered if, cast adrift on a strange and fierce world in the midst of enemies who had slain my father and brother, I myself would have behaved as bravely.

She was a good soldier. Impulsively I felt through the darkness and possessed myself of her hand. She made no resistance and for a time her fingers relaxed passively in my palm. Between us, as always when she was near, I felt pulsing the vital current, the current of life and hope and happiness, the current of love. For I loved her and had from the very first, when her white and suffering face seen through the transparent doors of her cube prison had incited me to rashness in an effort to relieve her distress. I felt that between us words were unnecessary and that she understood my feelings perhaps better than if I had voiced them. Yet she made no resistance!

With a passion that I was wholly unable to withstand, I reached through the night for her other hand and caught her close to me. I felt her muscles tense as she lay in my arms. Then, despite the darkness, our lips met in a first kiss.

The sweetness of her surrender dazzled me. Alone in the wreck of the shattered cabin and surrounded by the gray shadows of enemies, we knew a love such as falls to the lot of but few men and women. After a moment I released her and bent over as might any lover, to kiss my lady's hand.

A BLACK shape looming beside us recalled us to our senses. Automatically I reached for my rifle and then realized that the shadow was Dr. Frelinghusen coming through the trap.

"Dana," he whispered, "I've done it. The scouting party is cut off from their main body. The star signal shall never be sent. We have won."

"How?" I gasped.

"Because nature is helping us," he replied. "But hurry. We must leave this place instantly. Where are the packs?"

Hidden in the shadows, it was some minutes before we found them. The doctor was fuming with an impatience so unusual that I was in some doubt as to his sanity—especially so in the light of his last statement.

At last we got under way, and clinging hand to hand made our way through the underbrush directly behind the cabin. Familiar as he was with the terrain, the doctor guided us in a straight line directly away from the city of cubes and toward the rim of the plateau. Despite his plea of the urgent necessity for haste, I forced him to move slowly and carefully.

The going was rough and highly dangerous. Stumbling through the darkness, we escaped outposts of the shadow-men only by miracles. Time after time, I feared that all was lost and that we were discovered. Then at the last possible moment, fate would intervene and save us by a hair's breadth from being captured.

It was the doctor's fearful impatience which continually threatened us with disaster. Again and again when prudence dictated that we wait and reconnoiter, he pushed boldly ahead. A tiny knight-errant with his cocked rifle in his hand and his white shirt gleaming like a torch, he violated all the rules of careful campaigning and yet escaped discovery.

As we climbed higher and approached the rim of the plateau we came into the circle of reflection from the huge lights in the circle of cubes and our dangers increased a thousandfold.

Once I paused to look behind us in amazement at what was taking place. The immense cylinder had reached a height of at least a hundred feet and was obviously nearing completion. A crew of the dark-elad workmen

swarmed to and fro, manipulating the giant cranes which swung load after load of materials from the cube to the cylinder. They worked with the frenzy of desperation. A hum as of a hive of giant bees came up to us from the circle. The prodigious lights, directed by a score of attendants, swung ceaselessly back and forth across the open space. Furnishing a background for the excitement were the cubes themselves, gigantic monsters crouched, it seemed, in readiness to spring. It was a veritable city—a city of steel and iron, of potential desolation and death.

“Hurry, Dana! Hurry!” The unguarded voice of the doctor sounded from ahead of me. Obeying his command, I turned and made my way up the slope after him, occasionally lending a hand to help Aien over or around a fallen tree or a giant boulder. As the brush cleared away, we ran forward recklessly to keep up with the doctor, who hurried as if endowed with the strength and speed of twenty men.

In front of us, from the rim of the plateau, I heard a shout. We had nearly reached the edge. Disdaining further pretense of taking cover, we pushed boldly through the last line of trees and faced the open expanse of ground which led to the rim.

But the way was barred!

Ahead of us, at intervals along the crest, were placed searchlights, miniature duplicates of the ones in use below. Their rays covered every inch of the edge of the plateau, preventing either entrance or exit, unseen.

Abruptly the doctor paused to drag out his watch and light a match.

“Dana,” he said quietly, “we have just about three minutes. Shoot at their lights, and when they go out, run for it.”

Sensing at last that our danger was immediate, I dropped on one knee and opened fire on the nearest light. My first shot scored a direct hit and with a splutter the light went out.

Reversing our fire, the doctor and I concentrated our rifle fire on the light apparatus on the other side. It seemed an eternity before we landed a hit and saw the glare vanish. There was now a dark spot some two hundred yards wide along the crest directly in front of us.

Snatching Aien in my arms, I ran as I have never run before in my life. At the same instant, the shadow-men opened fire and I saw the effects of their strange, noiseless weapons.

They were shooting what appeared to be condensed electric current; blue flame lightning bolts that burned, destroyed, obliterated everything with which they came in contact. The discharge was constant, more like machine-guns than rifle fire. They played the bolts across our path as firemen direct a hose.

For a few seconds we dodged back and forth between the flashes of death, playing hide and seek with the rays. It was a hopeless battle.

“It’s come!” screamed the doctor suddenly and stopped in his tracks. “Lie down in this hollow, we may have a chance.”

Tossing the girl down beside him, I covered her with my body. Behind us, in the valley, I heard a roar more immense and more threatening than anything I had ever heard before. It seemed that the end of the world was come upon us.

I turned and looked toward the cubes. Where our cabin had stood was now a sheet of solid flame reaching high into the heavens. Then the burst of the explosion reached us.

“Pray God that it works, Dana,” begged the doctor. “Pray for the future of the earth. Pray for the men of our own race.”

It, whatever it was, worked. I felt beneath my feet the stirring of the earth. Slowly it moved at first as a tired demon awakens, then more rapidly, magnificently, resistlessly.

I watched the little plain occupied by the cubes. Beneath them the earth

was cracking and crumbling, twisting their iron frames and upending them as toy blocks are shifted upon their corners. Around the toy cylinder in the center, the workmen were grouped, struck motionless by the frenzy of a world gone insane.

Beneath their very feet the soil was opening, cracking in immense slits that widened into colossal valleys. Deep down in their depths I saw liquid fire, the fires of hell come suddenly to earth. Then the entire plateau tipped crazily, crumpling toward the center. I saw a gigantic funnel formed by swiftly revolving mountains of earth. The funnel became a maelstrom of dirt and rock and metal down which was pouring in a continuous stream the countryside we had known.

Silhouetted sharply for an instant against the background of subterranean fires were the toy men of the cubes and their puny contrivances, one instant visible and then vanished forever as they slid in a crumpled mass into the volcanic fires below.

I heard no noise. We were deafened, all of us, by the initial crash of the doctor's weapon, whatever it was.

The curve of the funnel rim was broadening, reaching up toward us with gigantic, tentacle-like fingers. I felt the earth slide beneath me. I was gripped with the sensation of nausea. Trees and bushes uprooted themselves and fell to earth, or else poised sickeningly with their roots in the air. Down toward the maelstrom we slid onward to the inevitable end.

And then, for perhaps no reason at all, the particular plot of ground some two acres in extent on which we found ourselves remained poised on the very verge of the precipice.

Too much exhausted to think or reason, we somehow staggered to our feet, and, dodging the chunks of metal which yet fell all around us from the skies, we climbed the few hundred yards to the rim of the plateau and half fell down the slope

of the mountain toward the green woods, the rivers and the calm safety below. I never remembered when we stopped sliding, to collapse in a tiny glen through which, untroubled by the catastrophe, a stream of clear water trickled quietly.

The last that I recall was a sensation of tumbling and falling down the mountainside accompanied, as I knew vaguely, by my two companions.

CONFUSEDLY, I realized that it was morning, but my muscles, torn and racked by the experiences of the last few days, refused to function immediately. After a long interval of half-awakening, I sat up wearily and commenced to take stock of the ravages of the night. My clothes were torn almost to shreds and they were covered with blood—my own blood, as I well knew after looking at my ripped and torn flesh. I had cut myself in a dozen places as I forced a way through the dense foliage for us in that last mad scramble.

My two companions were in scarcely better condition. The doctor, worn to but a shadow of his former self, muttered and tossed as he slept the sleep of complete exhaustion. I found it difficult to realize that this was the man who a few short hours ago had destroyed a thousand men and saved a world from war.

Of the three of us, Aien, who had gone through the most, had apparently suffered the least. True, her clothes were torn and covered with volcanic dust but her sleep was deep and healthful. I noticed that the dark hair was drawn back carefully to form a frame for her finely chiseled features and that her hands and face were clean. I knew that she must have awakened before the rest of us and bathed herself in the icy waters of the brook.

As I watched her, a queer exotic butterfly fluttered up from the waters to perch for a moment upon one of her tiny relaxed little hands. In the

clear gay sunlight the insect distended and stretched its wings until, alarmed at last by some vagrant breeze, it fluttered away.

The insect to me typified all that the future held for both of us. We had escaped. We were free. Life was good and the earth was young again. I realized that I had never really expected to escape from the city of the cubes. With me, as probably with my companions, it had been a mad gamble in which the cards were stacked before we began.

However, we were not yet completely in the clear. At any moment the remnant of the guards of the rim might discover our hiding-place. I wondered that they had not done so before. Already the sun was high overhead. It was time we were moving.

Aien woke lightly as my hand touched her shoulder. Dr. Frelinghusen was more difficult due to his greater exhaustion. I started to speak to him, and to my surprize found that I was unable to hear my own voice. The immense volume of that last ear-splitting crash had virtually deafened me. I must have made a queer picture as I stood there before them struggling to express my thoughts. However, my companions were too near exhaustion themselves to wonder at my plight. The events of the past night and our subsequent relaxation from the strain had left us all near the breaking-point.

During our hurried descent of the mountain we had, of course, lost our packs and retained only our rifles. Preparation for our journey then was a mere matter of a hurried wash in the brook, and we were ready to start. Personally I had no idea of the directions, but the doctor started off without hesitation and followed the creek bed downstream.

Shortly after noon we entered the Indian village from which a few days before a vaquero had departed to meet me in Lima. The natives were terror-stricken at our approach. No doubt

they had reason to be frightened, considering their proximity to the plateau and taking into consideration the fact that they must have witnessed some small part of the night's terrors.

After we had convinced them that we were living and not dead, the old chief welcomed us in great delight. The doctor and he were apparently old friends; in fact, I am not sure that he did not regard our companion as one of the immortals. Few men could have spent the past night on the plateau of Tahunjero and lived to tell the story.

After they had tendered us the customary obeisances, the best that the village afforded was immediately placed at our disposal. Although we were eager to escape at once from the region of our terrible experiences, we decided to put off the start until the next day because of our fagged condition.

We rested, therefore, and on the next morning, with our fatigue partly overcome and with our voices and our hearing rapidly returning to normal, we set out on our long trip to the coast.

DURING the journey, Dr. Frelinghusen was evidently reluctant to speak of the happenings of that last night on the plateau. Again and again when I endeavored to question him as to precisely what had happened, he changed the subject so obviously that I could not but take the hint. I came at last to believe that the virtual execution of so many human beings had preyed on his consciousness and that he would never discuss the subject again.

I was really too much engrossed in my own happiness to wish to open up any subject bringing with it unpleasant memories. For the first time in my life I was learning what the companionship and affection of an ideal woman could mean. Aien and I dwelt in Paradise, and if sometimes she grew sad and her gray eyes would fill

with tears, I understood that even Paradise must have its sorrows and that her thoughts were far away with the loved ones whom she had left forever.

She learned English with amazing rapidity. Before we had left the shelter of the mountains she was able to converse in simple phrases and I knew that before we reached Lima she would pass, except for her soft intonations, as a modern English or American girl.

On the last night in the desert, as we grouped ourselves around the campfire, I determined that we must decide at last on the story which we were to tell the world. Falling in with my plans, the doctor, for the first time, seemed to have forgotten his melancholy and chafed Aien with almost his old jovial manner. The omens were propitious and I decided to begin.

"Doctor," I said, "I suppose you have guessed that Aien and I are to be married as soon as we reach Lima."

"My boy," he replied, "I did indeed guess it. Although I had hoped to adopt her as my ward, I know of no man to whom I would rather trust her. You have my heartiest congratulations."

"Doctor," I asked, "don't you think that it is about time that we decided on what explanation, if any, we are to give? How are you going to relate this marvelous adventure and how will you account for her?" And I gestured at Aien, who was silently watching us.

"Dana, for the past two weeks I have been thinking of that very problem. I don't know. Every time I recall the happenings of that terrible last night, I shudder and long to forget it. I don't know what to say or do."

Now was my opportunity.

"Just precisely what did happen?" I demanded. "It was never quite clear to me. First there was a gigantic

explosion and then the earth caved in. What caused it?"

"Enough trinitrotoluol to wreck half New York," he replied. "I suppose you may as well have the complete story.

"When I first saw the plateau nearly four years ago, I had a suspicion that the cubes were hollow. I don't know just what I expected to find in them—a message perhaps from some other earth. I did not expect to find anything like this." He waved his hand toward Aien. "I sent out to the States for some high explosive, expecting to blast the cubes apart atom by atom if it was necessary in order to learn their secret. The TNT I packed in by horseback. It was a hair-raising experience, I assure you.

"I stored the stuff in the cave beneath the cabin. The earth beneath our plateau was a veritable network of tunnels, and I had no difficulty in packing the explosive quite a way down. By the way, Dana, did you ever notice any peculiarity about our plateau?"

I nodded. "Of course I did. As I climbed the mountain for the first time I decided that the whole structure was volcanic in origin."

"You are right. The entire plateau was a roofed-over volcano. It had been roofed over for thousands of years. But the molten lava and volcanic substances were still there, alive and powerful, deep down under the earth."

"So when you exploded your mine the roof caved in, did it?"

"Something like that, although there was another contributing factor as well." He picked up a specimen of tropical fruit shaped and formed somewhat like an orange, and tapped lightly on it with the hilt end of his knife.

"The action was much like this," he explained. "When I hit this fruit a single blow with the hilt, nothing happens. But if I hit it again and

again, repeating my blows always with the same force, the roof structure finally weakens, and at last it all caves in—so.” And he tossed the pulpy remnants of the fruit aside.

“In similar manner was the action of our cubes. They were giant hammers striking time after time at the breast of old Mother Earth. At last she weakened under the attacks—the earthquake on the last day was an indication of that—and when I help a little with my comparatively tiny mine, behold! the hammer head is buried, absorbed in the breast of the mighty one. Do you see how it occurred, Dana?”

I nodded slowly. It was all very simple now.

“But what are you going to tell the world?” I asked.

He shook his head. “We will tell them nothing,” he said. “Those foolish ones would never understand. I am too old to waste my last days explaining to idiots. And besides—there is the little one. Would you wish to have her regarded as a freak, a sideshow attraction for the delectation of an interested and amused civilization? No, we will say nothing and go our ways in silence and be happy. Is it not better so?”

He rose to his feet and started to his tent.

“One question more, Doctor,” I called. “Answer it if you will, and then we need never mention the mystery again.”

“What is it?”

“Tell me how you could interpret the log of the old inventor? What methods did you use?”

He shook his head. “Dana,” he said, “that is one of the questions whose answers I would wish to know myself. I did not interpret the book. It would be more exact to say that I read it. Dana, the log of the old inventor was written in archaic Sanskrit.”

“What?” I stared at him in amazed wonder.

“Yes, Dana. I repeat it, the diary was in Sanskrit. Why, I do not know. Perhaps Aien does. Some day we must ask her.”

And he left us to go to his rest.

LONG afterward I did ask her and this is what she said:

“My father was a great inventor, yet he worked from the ancient plans of someone who had lived long before. He copied his plans and wrote down his diary in that dead and vanished language of his predecessor, so that none but he might read it.

“The first inventor was a genius who has long been forgotten. The legend relates that he became disgusted with his people and built the first cube—built it and then vanished into space accompanied only by a woman.

“The name of the inventor,” she said, “was Edam, and the woman was called Ev.”

[THE END]

