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OUR COVER ILLUSTRATION

Depicts an exciting episode from Otto Wiltk Gall's novel "The Shot Into Infinity."

Here we see the spaceship *Geryon* plunging towards the moon. The moon may be observed at the right-hand side, still a great distance away.

In the position shown, the spaceship is rushing ahead at a tremendous speed, yet it is possible for the adventurers to venture outside the spaceship in airtight and acid-insulated space-suits. The men are connected to the spaceship by lengths of thin telephone wires, by means of which they can converse with each other. Inasmuch as they are in the so-called "free-fall," there is no strain on the light telephone wires, which they also use to pull themselves back to the ship. They may also return to the ship by firing pistols, as is also shown, in the opposite direction to which they wish to travel.

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The Hidden World

by
EDMOND
HAMILTON



And as it appeared I could see by that inset white spot of light, that the great dazzling column was slowly turning, like a solid revolving shaft!

IT is with a strange wonder that we of earth look back upon the thing today. It is with awe that we remember the dark menace that rose upon us from the hidden world — and how it ended. Nor have I, Arnold Vance, any less of wonder or awe than those about me, for all that I saw that they did not, for all that I stood where never men had stood before at the heart of that dread mystery and menace.

For though I lived through the vast, mounting terror of the thing to its colossal crashing end, even to me now it seems strange, and wonderful, and incredible, almost, that the end came as it did.

Four men only were there at the end, though a reeling world bore witness to it when it came. Four men—Dr. Howard Kelsall, Clifton Darrell, Richard Fenton and myself—who dared down into horrors undreamed of by all earth's generations, who alone penetrated into that greater horror that was rising upon the unsuspecting earth. And now that I take up this record of the hidden world and of things that centered upon it, now that I attempt to set upon paper that gigantic succession of events that rushed upon us, it is with us four men, that I choose to begin.

The first and eldest, Dr. Howard Kelsall, held at that time the post of chief geologist of the great Manson Foundation, in New York. It was a much-coveted position, but Kelsall was conceded by all to have merited it. It is unnecessary for me to recapitulate here the achievements that had established his reputation—his great "double-buckling" theory of the formation of the Rocky and Andes mountain-chains, his well-known calculations of the shift in primeval ocean levels, and the others. Suffice it to say that he had won a very real fame, and that that fame had been shared in late years by his chief assistant at the Founda-

tion, young Clifton Darrell. Kelsall and Darrell, though the one was of middle-age and the other in his twenties, were strong friends, and their friendship had come to be shared also by Richard Fenton and myself, two of the Foundation's younger physicists.

An unusual quartet of friends we made, but one which was bound strongly together. At the time

when the manifestations from the hidden world began, the time of the appearance of the first light-shaft at Kismaya, we four were sharing an apartment in the east Fifties, all of us chancing to be without immediate families. It was the custom of Dr. Kelsall and myself to walk from this apartment each morning to the Foundation building, the other two preferring the subway. And it was at the end of one of these walks, on a morning late in March, that the first news of the appearance of the light-shafts was given to me, by Dr. Kelsall himself. We were passing up the steps of the great gray Founda-



EDMOND HAMILTON

ONCE in a while a story comes along that for sheer daring immediately towers above the usual run of stories.

"The Hidden World," we believe, is such a story. From the standpoint of originality it certainly stands unmatched. There have been stories of the interior of our earth, particularly that by Jules Verne, "To the Center of the Earth," and others. But this is one of the most unusual of them.

The present author, however, has found an entirely new and most unique plan which is as original as it is daring in its concept. A number of astronomical experts have been consulted regarding the possibility of Mr. Hamilton's conception and they proclaim the system possible from an astronomical standpoint, although there is today no scientific information on the subject existing that would lead us to believe that a world such as Mr. Hamilton has invented, exists. That, however, means nothing, because no one has ever penetrated the inside of our world or of any other world, and one hypothesis, therefore, is as good as another.

Incidentally, the author has created a marvellous adventure story in addition to making "The Hidden World" a masterpiece of science fiction. It certainly is one of the most exciting stories that it has been our good fortune to read, and we know that you will not wish to lay down the book till you finish it.

tion building on that morning when he paused and pulled from his pocket a folded newspaper which he tendered me.

"I forgot until now to show you this, Vance", he remarked, directing my attention to a small article on the folded paper's side. "A strange occurrence—strange, that is, if it isn't the work of some reporter's imagination."

I took the paper and we paused there at

the top of the steps as I read the little article. It was but a few inches in length, a cable dispatch dated from the little coast town of Kismaya, lying in British East Africa, just south of the equator. The dispatch stated that a strange manifestation of light or force of some kind had stricken with panic the entire population of a native village some miles to the north, on the preceding night. In this village, which lay almost exactly

upon the line of the equator, incidentally, there had been on that night two white traders also, who vouched to the truth of the surprising though somewhat incomprehensible story which the terror-stricken natives told.

According to that story, it had been but a few hours before midnight, at the edge of the assemblage of huts that were their habitations. There had been no sound, no warning. A brilliant shaft of blinding blue light had abruptly stabbed upward from the earth at the village's edge to a height of fifty feet. This light-shaft, they said, had been perhaps five feet in diameter, and near its top had been set in its blinding blue light an equally dazzling spot or circular portion of pure white light. For perhaps two minutes the giant light-shaft had towered there, the terror-stunned natives near it frozen in fear. In those moments they had been able to see from the circle of white light in its side, near the top, that the brilliant shaft was turning, was slowly turning around and around. Then suddenly it had sunk and vanished, the ground where it had appeared seeming quite unchanged by its apparition, which sent all in the fear-stricken village racing from it.

The thing was puzzling enough, surely, and as I handed the paper back to Dr. Kelsall I shook my head. "It's past me," I told him. "Sounds like the work of the repertorial imagination you mentioned."

He nodded thoughtfully. "Perhaps so, Vance," he said. "Though the story was corroborated by the white men, and the truth seems quite circumstantial."

The Second and Third Lights

IT must have been, though, that the casual verdict which I rendered thus upon that first dispatch was the one given also by the world at large, for in the days that followed no further reference to the thing appeared in the newspapers. Such strange phenomena, indeed, are not unfamiliar among the dispatches of the great press-syndicates, the greater part of them being hoaxes of one kind or another, so it is not surprising that this particular incident evoked no further interest. I know that I had completely forgotten it by the next day, and Dr. Kelsall made no reference to it in the days that followed. It was not, indeed, until the appearance in the press of the dispatch from Moram Island, some twenty days later, that the first Kismaya affair was jerked back to my memory and to those of many others.

Moram Island, according to this new dispatch, was one of the innumerable islands lying off the western tip of Dutch New Guinea, a few miles to the north of the equator. Besides a number of Dutch planters and officials, it was occupied by the brown-skinned islanders who had always lived there, and it was from planters and islanders alike that this second report now came. The gist of the thing was that, a little before morning on the pre-

ceding day, a terrific beam of light had been seen on the sea south of the island.

It had seemed miles to the south indeed, so far that almost it must have been exactly over the equator itself. A great perpendicular shaft of intense blue brilliance, it had shot up from the waters southward like a great beacon through the night, had hovered a minute or two, and then had flashed down and out of sight. The awed watchers on Moram Island had thought it, at first, the beam of some ship's search-light, but the coming of dawn a little later had disclosed no craft whatever to the southward, making the thing seem quite inexplicable.

In itself, no doubt, this second phenomenon would have aroused but little comment, but the earlier and similar occurrence at Kismaya now made of this second incident something of more interest. Scientists, when questioned concerning it, agreed in attributing the two great light-flashes to falling meteors. They doubted whether the flashes had really lasted for minutes as reported, and also refused to take seriously the details concerning the turning shaft of blue light and the white circle of light upon it that had been reported from Kismaya. A meteor-flash, as they pointed out, is almost instantaneous, though very brilliant. The fact that no meteor had struck the ground at Kismaya they attributed to the burning-up of the meteor and its total annihilation as it flashed downward. The second surprising fact that both flashes had taken place almost exactly upon the equator they explained by the assumption that the earth was entering a thin belt or region of meteors which happened to lie in the same plane with our planet's equator.

This theory, as they pointed out, meant that more meteor-flashes might be expected in the equatorial regions, and though the theory had its defects it was, certainly, the most plausible one advanced. It was true that the great steady shafts of brilliance that had been described by the witnesses at Kismaya and at Moram Island were very different from a meteor's lightning flash downward, but that could be accounted for by the excitement of the witnesses, so that the whole matter seemed satisfactorily explained. In common with the few others who had paused to read of the thing, I let it pass from my mind. And Dr. Kelsall, to whom I knew this second incident would be of interest, was at that time on a short field-trip to the Adirondacks, so that at that time I had no opportunities of discussing it with him, and had forgotten it by the time that he returned.

Three weeks after that second phenomenon, though, the matter was brought forcibly back to my mind and to the world's by the *Callarvia* incident. The *Callarvia* was one of those giant cruise-ships designed to transport a thousand passengers in utmost luxury about the world, and at the time of the incident was heading homeward over the central Pacific from such a globe-circling cruise. It had ventured, in the past months, through the Atlantic and the Mediterranean, through the Indian and the Pacific oceans, and as that day closed was heading

east-north-eastward toward Panama on the last lap of its trip, its position some five hundred miles north of the Marquesas, with the equator's line a little north of the ship.

As the sunset of that day flared westward, therefore, the great ship's passengers had gathered upon its boat-deck, where a group of queerly-garbed sailors were preparing to perform the ancient nautical ceremonies proper to "crossing the line". By the time that twilight had come, indeed, those ceremonies were already going on amid the shouts and laughter of passengers and crew alike, the exact line of the equator lying at that time a little toward the north, the ship forging slowly and obliquely toward it. It happened, therefore, as the dim dusk thickened, intent upon the clowning of the group before them, passengers and sailors alike had no thought of the thing that was to come. No thought until, in another moment, that thing was upon them.

A half-mile ahead of the ship there stabbed suddenly upward through the deepening twilight a shaft of dazzling blue radiance that seemed to spring up from the sea itself and that hung at a height of fifty feet, slowly turning. Near its top was a circle of pure white light by which that turning could be marked, and in that first stunned instant as the passengers and sailors, in answer to a wild cry, gazed toward the blinding shaft, it seemed to them that that shaft extended down to depths inconceivable in the waters themselves, glimmering faintly through them. For a minute, a minute that seemed an eternity to them, that giant beam slowly turned there, and then as abruptly as it had appeared it had snapped down and out of existence, leaving those on the great ship staring at each other white-faced in the darkening dusk.

Kelsall's Theory

SUCH was the tale the great cruise-liner's radio sent spluttering forth, and so related it appeared within hours in the New York journals. And this, the third of these strange incidents, aroused for a short time, at least, an interest which the first two had failed to evoke. Again the thing had happened, and upon earth's equator as in the first two instances! The matter seemed to many startling for that reason, but the scientific authorities questioned concerning it only boredly referred their questioners to their earlier statements. The thing, they said, was but another instance of meteor-fall as had been the first two, and happening at the equator as they had confirmed the theory that the earth's equatorial regions were in the plane of a thin meteor-belt through which the earth was passing. The statements of those on the *Callornia* to the effect that the great blue shaft of light had remained for a full minute or two, and had slowly turned with its white circle of light upon it, the scientists discredited. For, as they explained, a meteor's brilliant flash caused by its burning up before it can reach earth's surface, often, is so intense as to impress the visual nerves with a sense of duration for longer than is

really the case, and to delude them concerning its real appearance.

This explanation, reasonable enough, was concurred in by those newspapers which made independent comment on the strange triple incident. Desirous as they were of a sensation, they were aware that the flashing out of three brilliant light-shafts on three far regions of earth's surface was of but little intrinsic interest to their readers, save for a few of the more scientifically inclined. So that though for a day or so they published what comments they could gather on the *Callornia* incident, the very lack of further developments in regard to it could not but make it soon of no more interest to them. And so, quickly enough, this third strange phenomenon was forgotten by newspapers and readers as had been the first and second.

My own interest, though, had been definitely caught by the strange recurrence of the phenomenon, and I resolved to discuss it with Dr. Kelsall, who had shown such interest in its first happening. When I reached our apartment that evening, though, I found that Dr. Kelsall had not yet arrived at it from the Foundation, nor was he there when Darrell and Fenton and I returned there after dinner. It was natural enough, however, that this subject uppermost in my mind just then should have entered our conversation, and we were engaged in a discussion of it when Dr. Kelsall finally entered. I apprised him, briefly, of the subject of our talk, but to my surprise when I had done so he ventured no suggestion on the thing, but sat beside us in silence. Gazing out beyond us, as we watched him in silence for the moment, his strong face and keen steel-gray eyes seeming brooding upon something, he sat there for moments unresponsive before turning finally toward us.

"Darrell—Fenton—Vance—" he said, his eyes moving over us. "It's about this thing that I wanted to talk to you tonight."

"This thing—these three light-shafts?" asked Darrell, and Kelsall nodded.

"Yes," he said, "these three great light-shafts, that have flashed into being, one after another, at three different spots around earth's equator. And what, in your opinion, caused those light-shafts to appear? Meteors?"

Darrell shook his head. "No, that's what we were discussing when you came in, Kelsall, and had decided that they couldn't be meteor-flashes. For all who saw them say, apparently, that they were great beams or shafts of light instead of flashes, and no meteors were seen or heard. Yet what, then, could have caused them?"

"I do not know that," Kelsall said quietly. "But one thing I do know, a thing that none other on earth has guessed. I know where and when the next of these enigmatic light-shafts will appear and I propose that we four go there and solve the mystery of them when it does appear!"

Astounded, we stared toward him, but then before we could ask him a question of the many that

whirled suddenly in our brain, he had turned and had taken the small globe from the table beside him, had turned back to us and was speaking quietly on.

"Before you can understand the thing that I have discovered," he said, "you must understand the locations in which these three strange light-shafts have appeared on earth. Now as you know the first light-shaft appeared just north of Kismaya in British East Africa, just on the equator, on the night of March 22, two and one-half hours before midnight. The second," and he spun the globe a little, "appeared here on the equator just south of Moram Island, off New Guinea. Both light-shafts, as you know, as all noticed, appeared almost exactly upon earth's equator. But there is a stranger thing that no one else noticed—and that is that the second light-shaft appeared just one-fourth around earth's equator from the first!

"Strange, is it not? Yet here is something as strange. Here at this dot I mark on the blue of the Pacific is the latitude and longitude reported by the Calloria on the evening that the third light-shaft appeared before it. That dot, that position of the third light-shaft, is exactly another fourth around earth's equator from the position of the second light-shaft, exactly a half around earth's equator from the first! In other words, these mysterious shafts of brilliant blue light have flashed into being in a regular progression around earth's equator, each appearing exactly upon that equator, and each appearing exactly a fourth around earth's circumference, from the last one!

"Now, that being so, can it be doubted that when the fourth light-shaft appears, it will appear in the same regular progression, at a spot another fourth around earth's equator from the third? Thus one has only to measure with accurate maps from the position of the third light-shaft, a fourth around earth's equator, to find the spot where the next light-shaft will appear! And that is what I have done today, and doing so I found that spot. It lies in the Brazilian jungles just north of the Amazon River's mouth, a spot lying between two little-known rivers, the Malgre and the Tauraurua, which join each other exactly at the equator. So that it is upon the ground between those two joining rivers there in the Brazilian jungles, that the next of these strange light-shafts will undoubtedly appear!

"But you will say, when will it appear? Well, if you will reread the accounts of the three light-shafts, you will discover that each was separated by as regular intervals of time as of space. Exactly twenty days, and six and a half hours, elapsed between the appearance of the first light-shaft at Kismaya and the second at Moram Island. The same exact interval of twenty days and six and a half hours elapsed between the Moram Island appearance and the sighting of the third light-shaft by the Calloria. With this regular progression in mind, therefore, it cannot be doubted that the same interval will separate the appearance of the third and fourth light-shafts, if a fourth appears. So that we

can say positively almost that if that fourth shaft appears it will do so twenty days and six and a half hours from this last one, which sets as the time of its appearance a half-hour before midnight on the night of May 21st, more than two weeks from now. And I propose, now, that we four be there when it does appear!

"For who can tell what mysteries lie behind the appearance of these strange, terrific light-shafts? Who can tell what we four might not learn if we were present, ready to study it? We alone of all men know where and when it will appear, if it does appear, and shall we not then endeavor to penetrate their mystery? And mystery it is, I think, that lies behind them. For how comes it that these shafts of brilliance, which could not have been made by any known device of men, yet have appeared around earth's equator with human and more than human exactness and regularity of time and place? What is their unfathomable cause, their purpose? To us four is given the chance to solve these questions. In that solution it may well be that we will penetrate into mysteries and into forces as yet undreamed of by any on earth. And you, Darrell and Fenton and Vance—will you not go?"

There was a moment's silence at his final question, a silence in which, with minds strangely awlwhirl from the things that Kelsall had spoken, we gazed at him, and at each other. Then suddenly, as our eyes met, we knew without words each other's thought, and Darrell turned to Kelsall, speaking for all of us.

"We're with you, Kelsall," he said quietly. "Whatever mystery lies behind these light-shafts, we're going with you to solve."

CHAPTER II

The Spheres from Below

"A HALF-HOUR before midnight on May 21 the fourth light-shaft should appear—and that's but six hours from now!"

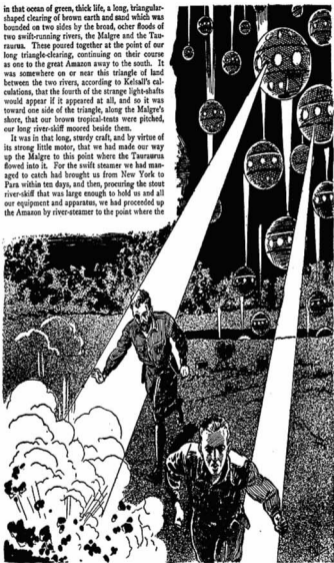
It was Dr. Kelsall who spoke, and as he replaced in his pocket the watch at which he had been glancing, we four turned for the moment from each other, gazing about us.

Around us there stretched away in all directions the vast green solitude of the Brazilian jungle, a tremendous solid mass of vegetation that seemed to lie like a great blanket over the earth. The great, close-packed trees, the thick vines and lianas that bound them everywhere together, the impenetrable plant-life that choked the lower ways between them, swarming with brilliant-bued birds and monkeys and strange insects, with larger animals stirring beneath—these extended out from us on all side, lit now by the waning glory of the sunset to the west. The whole scene about us impressed one most with the illimitable fecundity of the life, plant and animal, with which it swarmed, and it was a fecundity of life, so dissociated from anything human, that it was strangely depressing.

We four, however, were standing upon an island

in that ocean of green, thick life, a long, triangular-clearing of brown earth and sand which was bounded on two sides by the broad, other floods of two swift-running rivers, the Malgre and the Taurasua. These poured together at the point of our long triangle-clearing, continuing on their course as one to the great Amazon away to the south. It was somewhere on or near this triangle of land between the two rivers, according to Kelsall's calculations, that the fourth of the strange light-shafts would appear if it appeared at all, and so it was toward one side of the triangle, along the Malgre's shore, that our brown tropical-tents were pitched, our long river-skiff moored beside them.

It was in that long, sturdy craft, and by virtue of its strong little motor, that we had made our way up the Malgre to this point where the Taurasua flowed into it. For the swift steamer we had managed to catch had brought us from New York to Para within ten days, and then, procuring the stout river-skiff that was large enough to hold us and all our equipment and apparatus, we had proceeded up the Amazon by river-steamer to the point where the



There had stabbed from the spheres other narrow beams, yellow instead of white. The rays shot over and past Kelsall and Fenton, and we saw the ground where they struck seemingly gouged by a giant invisible hand—a great crater scooped suddenly from it.

Malgre flowed into it. There, leaving the steamer, we had begun the most toilsome part of our journey, the slow fight upward against the Malgre's current, through jungles that stretched to the north and to over the Guianas, jungles swarming with animal life and with their only human inhabitants a few half-glimpsed brown Indians. It was the great wilderness of the Brazilian Guiana into which we were penetrating, and so toilsome was our progress that had our goal been but little farther we could never have made it before the calculated time.

As it was, it had only been on the preceding day that we had reached this triangle of clear land. Until the present moment we had been busy in arranging the apparatus. That apparatus had given us anxious moments in our rough journey upward in the skiff, for much of it was of a super-sensitive and delicate nature. There were black-cased cameras, cinema and still types, some equipped with various ray-filters and screens. Square fluoroscopes lay ready beside the delicate galvanometer circuits and electroscopes that had been set up by Fenton and myself. If a fourth great light-shaft appeared near us, indeed, it would be strange if we four with the comprehensive equipment which we had set up would not be able to record the shaft's appearance and to determine, even though it lasted but a minute or two like the others, its nature, whether electrical or radio-active or simply light.

We were ready, indeed, for the coming of the fourth light-shaft, yet now as we four stood there, brown-garbed, white-helmeted figures with heavy automatics swinging always at our hips, it was with an oppressing doubt that I gazed about me. The whole vast wild scene about us filled me with misgivings. Had we come, after all, on a wild-goose chase? Had the appearance of those three light-shafts, after all, been due only to some freak of natural forces, the regular progression in time and space of a mere coincidence, and had Kelsall been far afield in his belief that here where we stood another light-shaft would appear within a few hours? These were the questions that troubled me as we stood there together, watching in silence as the sunset westward flared and faded, and at last, turning to the others, I expressed some of my doubts.

"The whole thing seems rather incredible, doesn't it?" I asked. "Incredible for us to expect a fourth light-shaft to appear at this exact spot."

I indicated with a wave of my hand the thick walls of jungle that rose around our river-bordered clearing, and Darrell and Fenton gazed silently around at my gesture. Kelsall, though, shook his head.

"No, Vance," he said, "if a fourth light-shaft appears it will do so here and at a half-hour before midnight. I'm certain of that—for the appearance of the other three have been superhumanly exact in time and place."

"But there's nothing unusual here," I said. "We've explored thoroughly all this clearing and the region immediately around it, and we've found nothing unusual—no sign of the presence of human life, even."

"There was nothing strange or unusual there at Kismaya, or south of Moram Island, or before the *Collarvia*," Kelsall reminded me, "yet the light-shafts appeared there. And though no other humans lie within leagues of us, I think that there is nothing human behind the mystery of these light-shafts which we have come here to solve."

"But our plan of action?" questioned Darrell. "In case the fourth light-shaft does appear it will last only for seconds, and we'll need to be quick if we're to gather any data on it in that time."

Waiting For Midnight

KELSALL nodded. "Yes, Darrell, and for that reason we'll take up separate stations when the time approaches. I want you and Vance here to take up a position at the north or broad end of this triangular clearing, just at the jungle's edge. You will hold the two cameras, ready to turn them upon whatever spot the fourth shaft appears, if it does appear; Vance, who like Fenton is a physicist and understands such work better than we, can use the fluoroscopes to determine whether the shaft is fluorescent in nature. Fenton and I, on the other hand, will station ourselves down at the clearing's point, on the open sand, and Fenton can watch his electroscopes and galvanometer circuits while I use the spectrograph on the light-shaft. In this way if the light-shaft appears in this vicinity as it should, even though it lasts for but a minute or more, we should be able to determine accurately its nature and gain enough data to enable us later to discover its cause."

"You have no theory yourself as to that cause, then, Kelsall?" asked Fenton curiously. "You've never ventured any to us, but you must have some thought concerning it."

Kelsall's face grew grave at the question. "I have a theory," he said, slowly, "but not one I want to mention now. A theory which to my mind can alone account for the appearance of these strange shafts of light, yet which is so startling, so insane, almost, that even you could not take it seriously now. But if another light-shaft appears here, if we cannot discover its nature, it may be that the thing that has suggested itself to me will be corroborated by our evidence. And if that is so—"

He did not finish, but as Darrell and Fenton and I stood there beside him, regarding him, something of the strange suspense, the fear almost, that held him, was communicated to ourselves. So it was in silence that we stood there still, while the last colors of the sunset faded westward, while the deep tropical twilight stole westward across the world like a veil drawn after the descending sun. Swiftly then the darkness of night, soft and velvet-like, was upon us, with the brilliant constellations of the equatorial sky burning out brightly overhead, with a strange tremor and stir of renewed and re-awakened nocturnal life running through the dark-massed jungles on all sides of us. Night was upon us, and soon now there would be upon us also that hour, that moment, for which we had trailed to this spot, so now we began to follow Kelsall's or-

ders and to arrange ourselves and our masses of apparatus about the long clearing.

At the long triangular clearing's northern end, its broad base in effect, Darrell and I quickly set up our cameras and fluoroscopes, just at the edge of the thick wall of the jungle. That base or side of our triangular clearing was perhaps three-quarters of a mile in width, and from that jungle-bordered base the clear triangle of ground stretched southward, bordered on either side by the two swift rivers, for a similar distance, to the long sandy point where the two rivers converged, the triangle's tip. It was upon that tip now that Kelsall and Fenton, in turn, set up their own apparatus, their spectrographs and electrical apparatus, Darrell and I helping them and working without hamper in the clear thin starlight that lit all the clearing. This done, the four of us met again for the moment at the clearing's center, before taking up our positions with our apparatus.

Kelsall clasped the hands of Darrell and myself strongly. "Darrell—Vance—", he said, "I know that you will do your best on this. Be ready, and if the light-shaft does appear anywhere within sight of us, get your instruments on it at once."

Darrell nodded, raising his hands for the moment to the shoulders of Kelsall and Fenton. "We'll be ready for it," he said. "And if nothing happens—well, we'll have done our best."

With these words, we turned, and then the four of us had separated, Darrell and I striding toward the clearing's northern jungle-wall where our instruments lay ready, while Kelsall and Fenton started for the sandy tip that was to be their position. We had retained our heavy pistols, the profusion of fierce wild life in the jungles about us making that a necessary precaution. At our position we crouched down among our instruments. Our last preparations had been made, and our wait for the appearance of the fourth light-shaft began.

A glance at my watch showed me that there remained still more than two hours before the coming of that moment, a half-hour before midnight, which Kelsall had calculated as the time of the next shaft's appearance. We had begun our watch thus early, at his own suggestion, in case that those calculations might have been a little inaccurate, and so would be ready for the light-shaft's appearance even though it came an hour or so ahead of time.

We waited in silence for that thing which had brought us to this savage and remote spot. Far down at the clearing's tip we could make out in the starlight the dark, vague shapes of Kelsall and Fenton, crouched likewise with their own equipment, but they were as silent as ourselves.

I found myself listening, in that silence, to all the myriad strange sounds that came from the thick jungle behind us, the distant coughing snorts or dull trampling sounds of large animals, the shrill sounds of countless insects, the occasional swashing of large lizards or reptiles in the rivers to east and west. The sullen heat of the day, the burning heat of the equator upon which we were, had de-

clined only a little with the coming of darkness. And as the minutes dragged past with no other sight or sound save those of the profusion of jungle life about us, as the great tropical constellations sloped majestically across the sky, to my physical discomfort was added the return of my troubled doubts.

The Light Appears!

IT seemed to me incredible, almost, that we four should have found reason enough in the facts that Kelsall had discovered to bring us to this wild spot, far from civilization's farthest outposts, in the anticipation of witnessing a repetition of the three phenomena that had already occurred. It seemed insane, almost, for us to expect that a fourth of those strange light-shafts was to appear at exactly this spot, at the exact time that we had calculated. And as that time slowly approached, as my watch's hands steadily approached to the position that would mark the half-hour before midnight, and as no slightest unusual sight or sound came from anywhere about us, I felt the doubt becoming stronger and stronger.

Darrell, though, was beside me as silent and unmoved as ever, and far down at the clearing's tip I could make out still the dark figures of Kelsall and Fenton, waiting, like ourselves. With watch in hand, now, I watched the larger hand slowly moving toward the half-hour position, only minutes remaining now until our calculated moment would arrive. Slowly, minute by minute, that hand moved, and now was within a half-dozen minutes of the half-hour, yet from about us had come nothing new. Now it was within four minutes, three, two, one—Tensely Darrell and I were watching it, now, as the watch's hand moved at last within a single minute of the awaited moment our hands had clenched unconsciously with suspense.

Then at last, seeming infinitely slow, the hand had moved to the half-hour position, and with our nerves taut with suspense, with our hands ready on the instruments before us, Darrell and I waited, gazing about us, gazing at—nothing! No single gleam of light had appeared in that moment in all the dark mass of the jungle about us and behind us, no light-shaft or sign of one! Gazing for the moment at each other, sick with disappointment in that moment, Darrell and I rose to our feet, while down there at the clearing's tip we saw Kelsall and Fenton rising even as we did. We had failed! Our plan, by which we had thought to solve the mystery of these strange light-shafts, had proved futile, after all. I took a step forward, to go down to Kelsall and Fenton, disappointment wrenching still at my heart. A single step forward I took, and then, abruptly, I had halted in my tracks while at the same moment there had burst a hoarse cry from Darrell, behind me.

There before us, at the center of our great triangular clearing, almost, half-way between ourselves and our two friends at the tip, there had stabbed

suddenly upward a terrific beam of brilliant blue light whose dazzling intensity in that moment seemed blinding to my eyes! Fifty feet upward from the clear ground of the clearing it towered, a tenth of that in diameter, and even as I shrank back in that instant from its awful, soundless appearance, even as I heard the cries of Darrell and Kelsall and Fenton, I had seen that near the shaft's top was set in some strange way a circle or disk of pure white light, as brilliant as that about it! And, as it appeared, I could see by that inset white spot of light that the great dazzling column was slowly turning as it towered there, turning like a solid revolving shaft!

In the single instant of the terrific beam's appearance I had glimpsed these things, and then had leaped back to the black fluoroscopes which in the next moment I had trained upon the shaft. Beside me I heard the rapid clicking of Darrell's camera, knew that even at that same instant Kelsall and Fenton would be working with their own instrument. Because they were a modern recording development of the old time visual fluoroscopes, I knew that if the light before us was of a fluorescent nature that fact would be recorded instantly upon their screens. So I swiftly exposed them, one after another, to the great towering shaft of blue brilliance that loomed before us.

Surely that scene must have been one of infinite strangeness—the tropic night all about us, the awful giant beam towering there so strange and terrible, the figures of us four men to north and south of it, standing out like all things about us in its blue glare, and winking like madmen in that

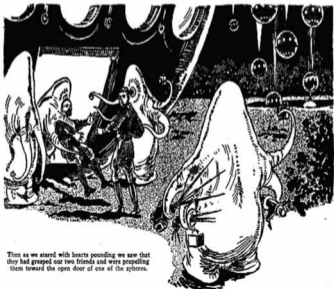
moment with our instruments to record all available data. Around and around the thing turned for more than a minute, the white-light spot upon its blue, brilliant column moving around with each turn. But that minute seemed to us drawn into hours. Then abruptly, as strangely and swiftly as it had appeared, it seemed to flash downward, to vanish like an extinguished light, leaving us there in a darkness that seemed deeper than before!

"It came—as Kelsall thought"—"but in God's name, man, what can it be?"

"Whatever it is we've got our data on it!" Darrell was exclaiming. "And there come Kelsall and Fenton, now—"

Kelsall and Fenton had risen and were striding excitedly toward us, calling to us in answer to our own shouts as Darrell and I strode to meet them. They were within a few hundred yards of us, I think, the ground where the great light-shaft had appeared lying between us, when a thing happened the mere memory of which sickens me with dread to this day.

In one lightning instant the thing had happened. There was a gigantic stabbing flash of yellow light that flared for a moment blindingly before us, and at the same instant there broke from about us a titanic thunderous detonation that was like the crash of colliding planets! Slammed down against the ground by that terrific detonation, we were aware in that instant of only the stunning light and sound loosed before us, and then the thing was over, an almost thunderous silence following. But before us now, between our two groups, between that of Darrell and myself and that of Kelsall and



Then as we stared with hearts pounding we saw that they had grasped our two friends and were propelling them toward the open door of one of the spheres.

Fenton, there yawned in the clearing's surface the black mouth of a great shaft or well, five hundred feet in diameter at least, and perfectly circular in shape! And as Darrell and I staggered to our feet at that giant shaft's edge and stared downward into it, even as Kelsall and Fenton were staring tremblingly down on its other side, we saw by the starlight that fell from above into it that the great shaft dropped down to depths inconceivable, endless!

I think that in that moment as we stared down into the black and awful depths of that circular abyss we were too stunned in all our senses to comprehend even what thing lay before us. Mechanically, unthinkingly, we stared down into the great shaft, noting only in that moment that it was as perfectly cylindrical in shape as though bored by a giant drill, that its smooth sides, cut unerringly through rock and soil alike, fell vertically downward to a point where even the white starlight from above could not illumine the tenebrous depths! Then, as we stood there, I cried out inarticulately, pointed downward.

In the awful blackness of the great shaft's depths a tiny point of white light had appeared, and was growing larger! And even as we gazed down toward it with minds reeling from the import of the thing we saw, we glimpsed other light-points appearing beside and around it, other little white lights there far, inconceivably far, beneath, growing larger with each second as at immense speed they rushed up toward us! Growing larger until in moments more, as we gazed there, we could see that those white lights were flashing, brilliant white beams, beams that were flashing upward from great dark round objects that were racing up the shaft toward us! And in the next moment we recognized them as great metal spheres!

Each a full twenty-five feet in diameter, and massed together in a swarm of a full hundred or more, they were rocketing up the shaft toward us! From each of them flashed a white beam of brilliant light by means of which they held their course straight upward through the great shaft! Racing up toward us at speed unthinkable! And as they shot up toward us, with a humming sound, there came to my stunned ears a wild cry from Kelsall, standing there across the great shaft's rim from ourselves.

"Spheres!" he was crying madly. "Sphere-ships from inside the earth! Darrell—Vance—I see it all now, the light-shafts, this opening, the spheres—get back, for God's sake, get back from the shaft!"

CHAPTER III

The Things of Flesh!

THE next moment, as Kelsall's wild cry echoed in our ears, I was aware only of Darrell beside me clutching my arm, jerking me back, and of a wild, nightmare rush toward the wall of the jungle north of us which we had left a few minutes before! I glanced back for one instant, glimpsed Kelsall and Fenton running back from the great shaft, running back toward the clearing's tip, Darrell and I almost to the jungle's dark mass, were flinging ourselves toward it with one last effort. And as we did so I heard a sudden hum-

ming in the air behind us, and then even at the moment that we hurled ourselves inside the jungle's thick cover I had half-turned and had seen that the swarming metal spheres, their white beams flashing still, were emerging from the shaft into the open air!

The next instant their great swarm or mass was halting, hanging there above the shaft, and their beams of light were stabbing and circling swiftly in all directions through the night, questing and searching. Crouched there in the thick undergrowth behind the trunk of a great tree, we realized that our bolt to the jungle's protection had saved us, for they had apparently not glimpsed us. But as we crouched there in that moment, I glimpsed Kelsall and Fenton running still toward the clearing's tip, over its bare surface, and then dozens of the circling beams had caught the two running men in their illumination and as they did so scores of the hovering spheres were leaping through the air toward them!

Instantly Darrell and I were on our feet, were on the point of leaping back out from our cover, for the spheres flashed after the running Kelsall and Fenton there had stabbed from them other narrow beams, yellow instead of white. These yellow rays shot over and past our two friends, striking the ground just beyond them, and as they did so we saw the earth where they struck seemingly gouged by a giant invisible hand, a great crater scooped suddenly from it where those rays struck, while at the same instant there came to our ears a bursting detonation of sound! As the ground before them vanished thus, seeming to disappear simply before us with the speed of light, Kelsall and Fenton halted, stunned, and then the yellow rays had snapped out and the rushing spheres had completely surrounded our two friends, had come swiftly to the ground in the circle about them!

Darrell jerked me back down into our cover. "Wait, Vance!" he whispered tensely. "They haven't harmed Kelsall and Fenton yet—wait here and maybe we can save them yet!"

Down again into our sheltering undergrowths we crouched, and then as we gazed forth could see by the clear starlight that the globes which had come to rest around our two stunned friends were more than a score in number, the remaining scores of the great spheres hanging still over the great shaft. Now, as we gazed with hearts hammering, we saw that in those metal spheres were transparent circles or windows. In the ones around Kelsall and Fenton round sections of the curved metal spheres were swinging open, doors opening. Then out through those doors from the interior of the spheres there had moved toward our two friends some scores of creatures, creatures at the sight of which Darrell and I clutched each other's arms with sudden fierce intensity, our brains spinning.

For the creatures that moved out of those spheres into the clear starlight and the light of the circling beams were surely such as men had never looked upon before. They were, each of them, a great white mass of flesh that seemed shapeless and sack-like, almost, a mass fully seven feet in height and half that in width, the upper part of the flesh-mass tapering a little in width. Each was upheld by two thick and equally shapeless lower limbs, each half

the thickness of the body it supported and each hardly more than a foot in length. Just above these limbs, at the foot of the shapeless body-mass, there projected the two equally short and thick upper limbs or arms, each ending in two tapering tentacles or feelers. Above these grotesque arms towered the great white mass of the body itself, and set in the upper part of that headless body, directly in its white mass, were the only features visible, a single dark and saucer-like eye inches across and circular in shape, with beneath it a horizontal row of seven small round apertures in the body which seemed the thing's mouth.

Such were these things that moved out of the spheres toward the motionless Kelsall and Fenton, as horror-stricken as Darrell and myself. And as they moved out I saw that it was only with great effort that they moved, that their strange thick limbs seemed to buckle and bend beneath them, and that to all appearances they were quite boneless, as I was to learn later was the truth. Great things of flesh with no skeleton or bones of any kind within them, great headless things moving slowly, half-dragging themselves forward, out of their spheres toward our two friends! I saw, even through the daze of horror that had settled upon me, that a number of those flesh-creatures held within the tentacled grasp of their strange arms small cubes of the same metal as their spheres, and could comprehend by the carefulness with which they kept the cubes held toward Kelsall and Fenton that they held the same terrible yellow rays that we had seen gouge so swiftly and incomprehensibly that crater in the earth.

Captured

BUT now, though, while Darrell and I gazed forth transfixed with horror, we saw that the great flesh-things were regarding our friends fixedly with their great single staring eyes. Kelsall returned their stare, trembling a little, and I could see Fenton's hand steal down to the automatic at his hip, then move away from it as though he realized that to use it would mean certain death instantly for Kelsall and himself. Then from the foremost of the great flesh-things, who swayed there with his efforts to hold his great weight erect upon his thick and boneless limbs, there came a strange succession of high, whistling sounds, sounds that seemed to have their origin in the row of seven small openings beneath his eye. It was as though the thing was expelling air through those openings to produce those whistling sounds, rising and falling swiftly in modulations which made it evident enough that the creature was speaking, speaking in his own strange way to our friends.

To that whistling speech, though, neither Kelsall or Fenton made reply, simply shaking their heads in a very evident gesture of lack of understanding which must have been read correctly by the creature before them. For a moment longer he contemplated them, then turned a little and directed for a brief moment his whistling speech at some of the other great flesh-things about him. At once they moved forward, moving with infinite efforts as though their great weight had been suddenly increased to a point where they could only move it and hold it erect by great efforts. Toward Kelsall and Fenton they moved, and then, as we stared

with hearts pounding from our cover, we saw that they had grasped our two friends and were propelling them toward the open door of one of the resting spheres!

As comprehension of that action's meaning came to us, as we understood in another moment that these strange creatures were bent upon taking Kelsall and Fenton, prisoners, down to whatever strange depths they had risen from, Darrell and I uttered low exclamations, at the same moment straightening and taking a step forward from our cover. Another moment, I knew, we would have burst forth into the starlight of the clearing in a wild effort to rescue our two friends, regardless of the death that must have rewarded such an attempt. But as we straightened there, as Kelsall was marched toward the open sphere with his companion, I saw him gaze for the moment in our direction, a furtive glance as though to assure himself of our escape. And when his eyes discerned our two figures there, on the point of rushing out to him, we saw him make a swift and surreptitious gesture toward us, a gesture that as plainly as words warned us back! A moment we stood irresolute in the face of that gesture, the attention of the flesh-things in the clearing upon our two friends, and then as calmer second-thought came to us and made us recognize the hopelessness of such an attempt, we sank back into our cover.

Crouched there, Darrell's hand gripping my shoulder tightly, we watched as Kelsall and Fenton were ordered inside the sphere before them. Then there followed them inside a number of the flesh-creatures, the door was closed and with a sudden hum of power the sphere and those resting about it rose upward. The great metal globe that contained our two captured friends moved with a half-score others downward, into the great shaft with swiftly mounting speed, and out of our sight. Whatever strange and unsuspected world within earth's depths these flesh-monsters had come from, it was back down toward that world, we knew, that Kelsall and Fenton had now been taken!

"Captured!" My whisper as we crouched there was one of hopeless despair. "Captured—Kelsall and Fenton—and God knows into what horrors beneath they've been taken!"

"Steady, Vance," whispered Darrell beside me. "Our one chance to get Kelsall and Fenton free, to get ourselves free, is to keep from being discovered by these things now."

Darrell's caution to me came none too soon, for now with the other spheres and that holding our friends having disappeared down into the shaft, the great mass of spheres hanging above the clearing was moving again. Still more than a hundred in number, the humming of their operation sounding to our ears like the droning of a great bee-swarm, they were moving off in different directions, were taking up a new formation. That formation was one of a great ring, a ring that expanded until it formed a circle of perhaps a mile diameter of which the clearing and the shaft was the center. In that ring the hundred spheres moved slowly and steadily, one taking the place of the other so that they held always that formation, circling slowly and smoothly over the jungles. It was plain enough, then, that these hundred circling spheres were guarding that shaft, were watching

all the country directly around it for possible intruders, their white beams searching downward and outward as they hummed on in their ceaseless watch.

Three of the great spheres, though, had separated from the others when they took up that formation, and had descended until they had come to rest at equal distances from each other around the great shaft's rim, one of them being on the side of that rim nearest ourselves. Then as Darrell and I watched them intently, the round doors of those three spheres had opened and out from them, slowly and with great efforts, had emerged a half-dozen or more of the flesh-monsters from each, two or three of the things remaining in each sphere. These grouped together at the great pit's edge, and as they stared down into it with their strange great eyes we heard the whistling sounds of their conversation with each other. They, and their three spheres, showed no signs of reascending, and it was clear that those three globes and their occupants had been deputed to guard the immediate mouth of the shaft while the hundred others patrolled watchfully all the country around it.

Theories and Conjectures

DARRELL and I, crouching there, saw thus that we had no chance whatever of escaping from our present position. For even there in the darkness, in the dense jungle, we were forced to crouch lower to the earth every few minutes or so as one of the white beams from the circling spheres above and about us would cut down through the night and through the jungle about us. It would be impossible, we knew, to attempt to win free by crawling back through that jungle, since across it there lay here and there other clearings in which would be no shelter from the searching beams and blasting yellow rays of the spheres. Also, neither Darrell nor I would have left then the great shaft itself, down into which we had seen our two friends taken.

So, hidden there, we watched, still somewhat dazed by the thing that had befallen us, the great creatures in the clearing before us. They had turned from the shaft, and were examining the spectrographs and electrical apparatus at the clearing's tip which had been used by Kelsall and Fenton on the appearance of the fourth light-shaft. All of this apparatus they brought back to the shaft's mouth, and then glimpsing the cameras and flourscopes lying a little out in the clearing from Darrell and myself, were dragging themselves toward these also. We melted farther back into the dense growths as they came near, saw them gather up that apparatus also and carry it back to the great shaft's edge, never suspecting our presence there in the growths so near them. Then, after examining our tent and equipment by the river's edge, they seemed satisfied for the time, and settled themselves heavily about their spheres, conversing in their whistling speech-sounds.

Now too the brilliant constellations far above seemed fading a little as there welled up eastward the gray light of dawn, spreading a pallor over all the heavens. Flushing to rose, and then to crimson with the uprush of the red tropical sun, the skies overhead marked the coming of day, and as Darrell and I glimpsed now the dark metal spheres

of the flesh-creatures circling hummingly still overhead, we saw that their searching white beams of light had been snapped out. In the clearing there lounged still, though, grouped watchfully enough about their spheres, the score or so of the flesh-monsters visible there, seeming even more grotesque and terrible in appearance in the light of day than they had been by night. And as day shed its light upon them and upon us, as we burrowed deeper into the thick vegetation with the coming of its revealing light, the daze of astounded horror that had been upon us since the first terrific blasting of the shaft and uprush of the spheres seemed to lift for the first time in some portion from our brains.

"Darrell," I whispered, "where in God's name have these things come from? The four light-shafts — this great opening from beneath — the spheres and these things in them—what does it all mean?"

He shook his head. "It's incredible—unbelievable," he said. "But we saw them come up through that shaft they blasted upward—we saw them take Kelsall and Fenton back down—down to their world—"

"But what is that world?" I asked. "It's impossible that these things should have come from some vast space inside our earth—yet what other theory can account for them?"

"God knows, Vance. But it seems as though they might have come from some strange space inside earth, for they can move only with great efforts upon earth as though accustomed to a gravitational power far less than that on the surface."

His reasoning was correct and I could only shake my head as he had done, as stunned and overwhelmed by the utter strangeness of the thing. And as we stared forth into the sunlit clearing at the monsters and spheres about the shaft there, during the slow hours of that morning, that strangeness and that mystery loomed larger and larger in my mind. What and from where were these incredible flesh-creatures before us? Were they indeed from some vast space within the earth? I had heard the possibility of such spaces discussed many times, and always it had been proved by geologists that no such spaces, even if they did exist, could hold any form of life, since with each foot that one penetrated downward into earth its interior heat became greater, more unbearable. And if this were so, as it was so, even in the first few miles which were all that man had ever scratched into earth's surface, terrific and annihilating temperatures must reign at earth's heart.

It had long been known, indeed, that earth's temperature increased approximately a degree for each sixty or seventy feet that one descended, and that meant that at a depth of a few dozen miles all matter must be in a molten condition, flaming with fiery heat. That theory, indeed, was directly borne out by the numberless volcanoes upon earth's surface in past and present, each of which flung up from time to time masses of the molten rock from earth's fiery interior. How, then, could any great space exist in earth's molten interior, how was it possible, (even were such space by some miracle to exist), for life to exist inside it at the tremendous temperatures that reigned there? It was well enough for fancy to conjure up great caverned spaces and

peoples inhabiting them inside earth's great mass, but the undisputable fact of the molten fires made them impossible.

Yet at the same time we had forced upon us the equally undebatable fact that it was from a space or world within earth's mass, that these strange flesh-creatures had risen upon us. And how, in the face of what we knew, could such a space or world exist? And, greater mystery still, if such a great space inside earth existed, it must lie beneath ourselves, since it was straight up from beneath that these creatures had blasted their great shaft. Yet it was not only here that the great light-shaft had appeared, but at three other places located with super-mathematical precision at three spots exactly on earth's equator like this one, all four being equidistant exactly from each other! And what had been the purpose of those four strange columns of light, and why had the fourth only been followed by the blasting of a shaft upward? And, above all, what was the purpose of the flesh-monsters in bursting up to earth's surface in their spheres, in guarding now so watchfully the great shaft that was their passageway?

Tortured Hours

It seemed to me during the seemingly-endless hours of that day that those questions were making of my mind a mere chaos of wild suggestions and counter-suggestions. The whole strange thing that had occurred, that was occurring, was so utterly alien to the natural course of events, so utterly inexplicable by any natural reasons, that it was only with an effort that I could consider it even in the hope of finding some explanation. And as explanation there was none, I could only give the thing up at last, ceasing my attempts to comprehend, and concentrating my scattered thoughts as well as possible upon the predicament in which we now found ourselves.

That our situation was in truth a desperate one was more and more apparent to us every hour. For as the burning sun slowly traversed its path across the heavens overhead, blazing down upon us and all about us with its fall blistering heat, we saw that escape was as remote as ever. The great flesh-monsters in the clearing, whom I had hoped the sun's heat would drive to the shelter of their spheres, seemed quite unaffected by it. It was a thing that puzzled me somewhat, since it seemed to me that creatures from some cavernous and sunless space beneath would needs be almost seared to death by the scorching rays of the equatorial sun, but it was apparent that those rays harmed them not at all. And high overhead the great ring of circling spheres still patrolled watchfully, still hummed here and there in their watch of the country around their great shaft, so that to break from our retreat though for but a moment would be suicide.

Yet suicide it seemed to Darrell and myself to stay in that retreat, as the slow hours of that day dragged past. For we knew that not much longer could we stand this killing combination of heat, hunger and thirst. Our lack of water, indeed, we appeased a little by chewing a twig from time to time, but our hunger was steadily growing and the heat of the blazing sun above was penetrating down to us and making us somewhat dizzy. Once, I re-

membered, I returned to realization of my surroundings from such a giddiness to find myself standing erect, and would have stumbled into the clearing had not Darrell held me back. Yet the great white monsters there at the shaft's mouth remained there still as watchfully as ever, their cube-containers of the yellow ray always in their grasp or at hand. Once we saw them draw out from their spheres flexible spiral tubes which they inserted in the small holes or apertures that seemed in each their mouths, and guessed that they were feeding, were drawing from containers or reservoirs in the spheres some liquid or semi-liquid food.

Save for this incident, though, there was no break in the deadly monotony of the hours, and as after a time that seemed an age we saw the sun settling westward, my tortured state of mind became all but unbearable. It was the fate of Kelsall and Fenton that to Darrell and myself was the most agonizing feature of our situation, the fact that we had no shadow of idea of what our two friends might, even then, be undergoing in some strange hellish world beneath. Numbed, almost, by the agony of that day's hours, we glimpsed the sunset flaming westward, bringing to my mind the sunset of the day before now seemingly removed from us now by the space of a thousand years. And then, as night crept again swiftly across the world, the great ring of scores of circling spheres above had snapped into being again their white stabbing searchlight-beams, keeping still their never-ceasing and enigmatic watch, while the three spheres around the great shaft sent their own beams stabbing forth to bathe all the clearing about them in white light also.

Sunken into a strange torpor of despair there, Darrell and I were roused shortly after the coming of the night by a sudden swift flurry of action in one of the rivers north of us. There had been the swash of some great reptile in its waters and at that sound from one of the circling spheres above a narrow yellow ray had cut down toward the creature, blasting it instantly from existence with a sharp detonation, the spheres above taking no chance whatever of any approaching their shaft. I had seen that yellow beam stabbing downward, had guessed, incidentally, its nature by then, surmising it to be some form of electronic stream shot with intense concentrated power. This, as I was later to learn, was its real nature, the yellow ray being in effect a highly concentrated stream of independent electrons, which were gathered in a special de-atomizing chamber and then shot forth in that concentrated stream with terrific power. It was thus very much similar in some ways to the well-known Coolidge or cathode ray of our own scientists, but being immeasurably more concentrated and forceful had upon all matter it touched an annihilating effect.

Desperate Chance

THE yellow electron-stream, indeed, was of such force as to wreck completely the atomic structures of all matter it touched, by smashing the revolving electrons of that matter's atoms into their central protons or knocking them completely loose from those protons, thus in an instant destroying the matter touched by the ray by transforming it into a comparatively tiny scattered swarm of pro-

tens and loose electrons. It was by means of a similar ray of gigantic size and power, as I had divined even then, that the flesh-monsters had pierced their great shaft upward to earth's surface in a single moment. And as I was later to discover, it was the same ray in an altered form that was used to drive the great spheres at such speed through the air, a projector at the rear of each sphere shooting forth a somewhat less powerful and fan-like ray into the air behind. This weaker and broader ray, invisible because of its weakness, had not enough force or concentration to destroy the air behind it with its broad electron-stream, but shot forth that electron-stream at a great enough speed against the air's atoms to result in a definite push against them, that push being utilized at each moment to send the sphere driving forward, its direction being altered by changing the direction of the rear-projector, while its speed was altered by increasing or decreasing the force of the electron-stream shot backward.

Even in our watch so far Darrell and I had divined some of these facts, but now as I saw the yellow ray stab downward to the north of us it was not they that held my interest most but the thing which the ray's sudden stab downward had in that moment suggested to me. I turned swiftly to Darrell and then in a tense whisper was outlining to him the plan that had suggested itself to me. Mad enough that plan was, but I felt that it held our only chance of action, since well I knew that not another day could we lie in our retreat fighting against the combined influences of the heat and our hunger and thirst and mental agony. So that it was with conviction enough that I told Darrell that the scheme, wild as it was, held our only hope.

"It's our one chance, Darrell," I whispered. "Our one chance to get down that great shaft—to follow Kelsall and Fenton into whatever strange world they've been taken and rescue them, bring them back!"

Darrell slowly nodded. "We'll have to try it, Vance. If we could get free—could warn the world of the coming of these things from beneath and the menace that that coming must mean to the world—we'd do so swiftly enough. But there's no chance for us to get free of this place with all those spheres above, and there is a chance to get down the shaft."

"It's so, Darrell," I said. "And if we can get down there, bring Kelsall and Fenton back with us, we should be able to break through these guarding spheres here then and carry to the world the truth as to what mysteries or menaces lie beneath."

We were silent both for a moment, as a little to the north and above a sphere hummed past with white beam circling, and then Darrell's hand and my own had clasped there in the darkness strongly. Then, half-rising, I began to carry out our risky plan of action. Turning a glance first upon the things in the clearing, I saw that the three spheres rested still around the great shaft, the flesh-monsters grouped still around and partly within those spheres, whose white beams bathed all the clearing. If we were to steal one of those spheres, as we planned now to do, we must get those great creatures away from them, if only for a moment, and to achieve that purpose I moved silently now

in the darkness on the ground and in the growths about us.

In a moment my groping fingers had encountered that for which they sought, a long and heavy section of dead limb that lay rotting in the mold beside us. I grasped it tightly, and then Darrell and I were creeping from our place of concealment in the thick brush, were creeping out until we crouched down just at the clearing's edge, our eyes upon the group of spheres and flesh-monsters at its center, around the shaft's mouth. For a moment we waited there with all our nerves taut, waited until the humming spheres that came and went high above seemed for the moment to have passed over and beyond us; and then, half-raising myself for the moment again, I whirled the big length of wood silently around my head and then threw it with all my force toward the river west of us, into which it splashed loudly, that splash seeming tremendous to my strained ears in the comparative silence that had lain over all about us.

Instantly as that loud splash sounded the flesh-monsters around the spheres had raised themselves, listening, and then the next moment were hurrying with great, dragging efforts across the clearing toward the river west of it, forsaking the spheres for the moment to investigate the source of that splashing noise, their ray-cubes ready in their grasp. Tensely we watched as they hastened in that direction, and saw that in only one of the spheres, that nearest us, did there seem still to be any of the creatures, those two remaining inside as though to guard their spheres. The remainder of the flesh-creatures, already, were half-way to the river, and Darrell and I saw instantly that to overcome the two creatures whom we could glimpse in the nearest sphere was our single chance, so, silently but as swiftly as possible, we crept out into the clearing and the white light that lay across it, toward that nearest sphere!

The Chance Wins

AS we crept out into that white light, our automatics ready now in our grasp, I heard the whistling speech of the creatures that were almost to the river's edge, and prayed that none might turn back toward us, that none of the spheres might hum down over us in those seconds. On toward that nearest sphere we were moving, half-crawling and half-running, keeping out of line with its round open door so that the two creatures inside might not glimpse us. It was the sphere furthest from the creatures at the river-bank, and in the moments that we crept toward it we kept its great round gleaming bulk as well as we could between us and those creatures. Hearts pounding with excitement and suspense, we neared the sphere, and as though to favor our venture the humming spheres that came and went above seemed to have expanded their ring still further or to be hovering over the land around the clearing for that moment rather than over the clearing itself. I could glimpse their flashing white beams high in the darkness to north and south, could glimpse too the unchanging white stars above, and then could hear the whistling speech-sounds of the two flesh-monsters inside the sphere as we crept nearer toward its open door.

Another moment and we were just outside that round door's opening, were peering for a moment

within it. The sphere's interior, we saw, was divided into compartments by square dividing walls within it, and we saw, too, that from the round door a narrow little corridor led across the sphere's mass toward a small control-room on its opposite side, one in which we could glimpse the switches and strange instruments that controlled the great sphere's operation. The door was near the ground, the corridor through the sphere slanting upward somewhat, and it was in this corridor that the two flesh-monsters were standing for the moment, their backs toward us, gazing in the other direction through the transparent wall or window of the control-room to the river-bank where their fellows were now hastening.

Without a sound Darrell and I crept through the door's round opening into the corridor behind the two great creatures, noting that each held in its grasp one of the ray-cubes also. Up the corridor's slanting floor, into the sphere, we moved toward them, and another moment would have seen us directly upon them, but at that instant Darrell's foot slipped upon the upward-slanting floor of the metal-sided corridor, and as he fell the two creatures had whirled instantly toward us! But even as they did so, even as their great single staring eyes saw us and their strange arms flashed up with the ray-cubes in their grasp, we had leaped upon them, and then before they had time to give warning to their fellows with a single whistling cry were grappling with them there in a swift, momentary battle of intense fury!

I felt the great mass of the monster with whom I struggled pressing down upon me even in the first moment that I gripped it, felt its thick strange arms reaching to grip me, or to bring the metal cube of the yellow ray into play. But the creature seemed capable of moving each big arm or limb only with an effort, and before it could crash me down to the floor I had raised the pistol in my hand, had pressed its muzzle in a single instant upon the thing's white flesh-mass just between the great staring eye and the horizontal row of holes that was the mouth, and then as I pressed the trigger there was a muffled report and the great mass be-

fore me tumbled downward, carrying me to the corridor's floor with it. I sprang up, though, to find the other monster had borne Darrell against the wall with all its great weight, but then at the same moment as mine Darrell's pistol had come up against the creature's body and as two muffled reports sounded simultaneously from our weapons it too fell. But this one, in the instant before it fell, had given vent to a great high whistling cry!

Instantly that cry was answered by other cries from the mass of flesh-monsters at the river's edge, and as we thrust the two lifeless creatures before us out of the sphere, we saw those others rushing madly across the clearing toward us! I shouted hoarsely to Darrell at that sight, sprang down the

sphere's little corridor into the control-room at its end, cast for a moment an agonized glance around that little room. The whole curving front of it was one great transparent window, through which I could see the flesh-monsters hobbling themselves toward us with all the power of their unwieldy, dragging bodies. They had not loosed

upon us the rays of the cubes they carried, thinking, no doubt, that in the sphere were still their two fellows, and now as they came across the clearing with clumsy haste I surveyed swiftly the controls of the sphere that lay before me.

The main feature of those controls seemed to be a row of metal studs set into a low panel, in front of which there rose from the floor two low metal standards upon the top of each of which was set horizontally a small metal wheel. In an instant I had grasped these wheels, was turning them, twisting them, but

there came no response from the great sphere's mechanism and in another moment the flesh-creatures outside, I knew, would reach us! I heard Darrell shout something to me, reached forward then in desperation and began snapping out the studs in the panel, one after another, and then as I tried the centermost of those studs there came suddenly a welcome and powerful humming from somewhere in the sphere beneath us. But outside now there were whistling cries, as the flesh-monsters rushed over the last few yards of the clearing toward our sphere's door, and I heard Darrell's gun cracking as he strove to hold them back. For an instant they fell back before his fire, but then, seeing through the door that the sphere held none of



Darrell sent our yellow ray stabbing upon them. As they bit, the spheres melted abruptly and vanished.

their fellows, they were raising their deadly cubes toward us!

At the moment that the cubes came up in their grasp, though, my hands had flashed back to the two wheels, turning them again, and as the first of them turned beneath my hands the great bulk of our humming sphere jerked suddenly up and forward, up and forward over the great black mouth of the mighty shaft! Hainging above its black depths in that moment I heard cries from the flesh-creatures below, glimpsed them running suddenly toward their two other spheres at the shaft's edge, heard the clang of our own sphere's round door as Darrell slammed it shut. Then the next moment I had whirled over the central wheel, and then even as from the running flesh-creatures a dozen yellow beams stabbed toward us, our great sphere had plunged suddenly downward! Downward into the blackness of that shaft, at the sphere's full speed, downward toward whatever mighty mystery or menace it was that lay below!

CHAPTER IV

Down the Shaft

IN that first moment, as we flashed down at such speed into the great shaft's darkness, all my efforts were bent upon the single object of keeping our down-plunging sphere from crashing into the shaft's sides. The white beams of light that stabbed from our sphere were the one guide to me in that moment, the one means of judging our distance from the shaft's sides. Those sides, as seen in our beams' light, were but a swift blur of matter to our eyes, for at the awful speed with which our sphere was whirling downward nothing more of them was to be seen. And as I hunched there over the twin control-wheels, whose use I had half-learned and half-divined in those first awful moments of the great sphere's rush, it seemed impossible that ever, unused as I was to its operation, I could keep our round vehicle from crashing against the walls of the great well into which we were plunging.

Gripping those wheels, though, having found that one was to control the direction of the sphere's motion and the other its speed, I strove to keep our great globe rushing straight downward. In another moment I found that one of the myriad strange instruments placed above the panel of studs was in the nature of a flight-level indicator, and found that by keeping the red dot that moved along this instrument's graduated length exactly at its center, I was keeping the sphere falling exactly downward. With this discovery I breathed a little easier, then suddenly stiffened again as Darrell, who was crouching beside me, gave a sudden startled cry. He was pointing upward, through the upper portion of our curving control-room window.

"Above us, Vance!" he was crying. "Two spheres—they're pursuing us down the shaft!"

I felt for an instant an extreme terror as I gazed up. For there in the darkness of the shaft above us, that awful darkness that seemed to hem us in on all sides and down into which at terrific speed we were falling, there were stabbing and circling beams of white light like those from our own sphere. I remembered my last glimpse of the flesh-creatures running toward the other two spheres, now I under-

stood that without waiting to give the alarm to the great patrol overhead, they had rushed down after us to destroy us here in the great shaft!

Instantly I whirled again the speed-wheel and as the humming beneath us waxed suddenly deeper our great sphere shot ahead faster and faster. It seemed straining beyond its normal speed in its wild rush straight toward the center of the earth. But above the white beams were dropping nearer to us, overtaking us, operated as they were by the flesh-creatures who understood them far better than I. They had means of increasing the speed that I was unaware of. For minutes we rushed down, pursuers and pursued plunging at a speed that was slowly causing the sphere to become hotter and hotter. Down into and through darkness unimaginable. Then as they drew steadily closer, the two spheres suddenly shot two narrow yellow rays stabbing down toward us!

"The yellow rays!" I cried hoarsely to Darrell, as I swerved our down-rushing sphere almost to the great shaft's side to evade them. "The rays—they mean to get us with the rays!"

"Not if we can strike back at them!" he shouted. "If I could find the control of our own sphere's rays—could fight them back—!"

He was examining frantically the myriad strange instruments and switch-batteries that were set in the little control-room's sides. In another instant, their rays were shot down toward us again, their white light-beams holding us in their glare now. But with another wild swerve of the sphere I managed to escape those twin shafts of destruction. That time, though, I had almost crashed the sphere into the other up-rushing wall of the great shaft, I knew that not for many moments could we continue to escape them thus.

Then came another shout from Darrell, and I turned to see that he had gripped a strange control set beside the control-room's window, a metal globe that was a tiny replica of our great rushing globe, with small studs set at six equal-distant points on its spherical surface.

Darrell pressed upon the stud at the little sphere's top, and as he did so there stabbed suddenly upward from the top of our own sphere a brilliant yellow beam that leaped upward and just between our two pursuers overhead! For an instant they seemed daunted by that unexpected shaft, fell back above us a little, but in the next instant they were plunging down again with renewed speed, their own yellow beams clashing and crossing there in the shaft with ours!

The Pursuers Caught

I THINK that never could there have been combat so wild and strange as that, that terrific duel between three great spheres rushing down into the darkness and mystery of the great shaft, into the depths of the earth. I heard Darrell's hoarse exclamations as he sent our own rays stabbing up toward our pursuers, heard even above the great humming of the spheres and the rush of winds about us the dull and distant detonations caused by the rays striking the great shaft's walls here and there. Whirling our plunging sphere precariously to this side and that, grazing the shaft's walls in wild efforts to escape the yellow rays that stabbed down about us, I realized that the two pursuing

spheres above were drawing closer and closer, would soon be just over us and able to loose their rays upon us without a chance of our escaping them.

I saw that in one last desperate expedient lay our only hope of escape, and above the wild melange of sound about me I cried a few brief words to Darrell. He nodded swiftly as he understood my plan. Then the next moment, gripping the control wheels tightly, I waited for a breathless instant, then suddenly closed the speed-control, whirling its wheel around and slackening the downward speed of our great sphere with breath-taking swiftness. So swift and unexpected was that slowing of ours that, even as I had hoped, the two spheres above had driven down on either side and past us before they could comprehend our action, could slow their own spheres also. And in the next moment as we hung for a moment above them, Darrell had sent our yellow ray stabbing down upon them, striking both spheres squarely.

For a moment they seemed to hesitate and as the brilliant yellow beam of death struck them, both seemed to melt abruptly and vanish! Then came the sharp detonations, caused by the surrounding air rushing into the vacuum left by the sphere's annihilation.

We were alone in the darkness of the great shaft, moving downward now at slow speed as we relaxed, half disbelieving in our escape from those two relentless enemies. The only sound now was the humming of our own sphere, and as we looked up and downward we saw that the only light in the great shaft was that of our own sphere's white beams, circling slowly about as our globe of metal moved downward.

"We got both spheres!" Darrell exclaimed, leaning wearily against the wall. "We've won through so far, Vancel!"

"Yes, and no more will be after us from above," I said, glancing upward, "for the flesh-creatures had no time to give the alarm to the other scores of spheres watching above—rushed down after us to destroy us themselves."

"We've escaped them, at least," Darrell said, "and have a clear way downward. But what lies beneath?"

I shook my head. "We must be many miles down the shaft already," I said, "but there's no change that I can see, in the shaft's size or darkness. We must simply keep on, Darrell."

I opened again the speed-control and as our sphere shot downward once more, falling smoothly now again into the great shaft's dark depths, we watched carefully the few details of its walls that were visible in the light of the white beams. Minutes before, during our wild running fight downward with the two spheres, we had flashed past and beneath the levels of limestone and sandstone and all the upper strata, and as far as we could make out in the uncertain vision of our downward rush, we were now falling between walls of igneous or fire-formed rock, the great shaft's opening having been pierced smoothly and vertically up through them.

Down—down—down—the shaft seemed endless to me as I gazed into the darkness unfathomable that lay beneath us, a darkness in which the beams

of our sphere seemed overwhelmed. We were humming downward at a speed that was as great almost as that of our first downward rush, and as the moments sped past I knew that we must be sinking farther and farther beneath the surface of earth each moment, yet still the darkness and the curving walls of the great shaft about us were the same. Intent upon the darkness below, in the hope of glimpsing something in that darkness, neither Darrell nor I noticed until moments later a thing which had been thrusting itself upon us increasingly with each moment. And that was the fact that the sphere, and the air inside it, were growing steadily hotter.

A New Danger

AS our minds took in that fact we exchanged sudden wide-eyed glances. Did this increasing heat about us, then, betoken the correctness of the theory of geologists that beneath its solid crust lay only fiery molten rock? I remembered the doubts and wonders that had held me formerly, and they deepened within me now as the air about us became more and more heated. Already we were breathing with some difficulty that parching air, and already the metal of the sphere about us seemed to have become almost too hot to touch. And now as we gazed downward we saw that in the darkness beneath a strange feeble glow of light was visible, a flickering, hardly visible sulphurous light that was becoming slowly stronger.

Down—down—already, I knew, we must be hundreds of miles beneath earth's surface. And as the sulphurous glow beneath us grew in intensity, as the heat about us became stronger and stronger, it seemed that our sphere must needs be falling at that awful speed straight to a fiery death. Yet the great shaft's walls fell still vertically downward, and though now those walls of rock seemed themselves touched by a light fiery glow like that beneath, seemed glowing themselves with their own great heat, I held the sphere's course straight downward with Darrell beside me gripping my arm. And now there could be no doubt that the walls about us were glowing, were radiating their own intense heat and light, and I held the sphere as exactly as possible to the shaft's center as we fell on downward, away from those glowing walls of rock.

Within moments the glow of those walls about and beneath us had become intense, terrible, and we could see that they were of solid rock no longer but of glowing, half-melting, half-fusing rock, becoming less and less solid. We could glimpse flashing portions of those walls flowing and moving slowly in thick, molten currents, their fierce light strong upon us now. It was as though we were falling now down through the center of a fiery hell. The terrific heat that radiated from those walls seeming to wither us as we crouched there!

By then the metal of the sphere had become almost burning to the touch, the air within it all but stifling, and as we choked and panted as that superheated air reached our lungs, I knew that to brush even against the molten walls through which we were falling would be to annihilate our sphere in their searing heat. Not for long, I knew, could we reel downward thus through this inferno of heat and light. And now over our sphere's humming

there was coming now to our ears a tremendous grinding and thunderous roaring from all the molten walls about us, and it seemed incredible in that our great shaft could drop downward through them thus, that they had not flowed in upon that shaft and closed it.

"We can't go on," Darrell gasped, his face flushed, his eyes rolling wildly. "This is unbearable."

I agreed weakly. I felt as though I could stand it for only a few minutes more. Then I should lose control of myself utterly. To those of you who have never been compelled to stand insufferable heat for any length of time it is hard to imagine our condition. My blood pounded terribly through my body, its throb hammering at my brain like hammers.

"No one can stand this," Darrell gasped, "Our last moment has come."

It was true. We were reaching our end. But then a sudden thought flashed through my tortured brain. How did those fleshy monsters stand it? They, too, must have been affected by this terrible ever-growing heat. Even with their experience with it they must have some means to protect themselves against a furnace in which no living thing could exist.

I told Darrell my thought. His head jerked up suddenly.

"Yes, that must be so. But how?"

"The controls," I said, "try them. There must be one to handle it."

And as I slackened the speed so that we were jerked against the floor of the sphere Darrell with his last strength fingered the other strange controls that lined the panels, trying this one and that. There was one set like a knob that caught his attention. It was on a wall and apparently had no relation to the others.

"I don't know what we're doing," he laughed weakly, "I may be plunging us to destruction with this."

"It's destruction anyway," I murmured. "Do anything, anything but get us from this unbearable heat."

I saw him turn the knob clear around through 90 degrees. And of a sudden there came a loud sputtering and whistling as of air being suddenly swirled. It seemed as though a tornado had broken loose outside our car. I had to use all my energy to keep the car on its path. But what to my utter surprise and relief when in a few seconds the air was becoming gradually cooler, the walls which had begun to take on a reddish glow go dark again. I saw Darrell smile at me weakly and then slump to the floor in a dead faint. I could not help him for in that tornado that raged in the shaft the car was being swirled about, every so often coming dangerously close to the still molten walls.

It was this condition that attracted my attention. Although the air was becoming cooler and cooler the walls of the shaft were just as hot. These people then had some strange means to get a local refrigeration; and the violent displacement of the air was caused by the cooled air about our car giving way to the more heated.

In a few minutes the atmosphere of the car had become bearable again and in fact it was steadily growing cold. Slowing up the car I reached over

and letting go of the control wheel for a moment I flipped back halfway the knob that Darrell had turned. The air became slightly warmer and the raging of the driven air outside subsided somewhat.

Darrell gradually came back to consciousness as we plunged down again. He slowly rose to his feet and gazed about him unsteadily.

"We're saved again," he smiled. "And what now?"

What now? That was the question in my own mind. Where was this endless race to lead us?

And then as if in answer to my question, there was a sudden gathering, an increasing of the thunderous sound and fierce light and searing heat about us, we seemed for an instant to be whirling down into solid flames about and beneath us. Then, as in a flash, a great circular opening in the walls of fiery light had appeared directly beneath us, and as our sphere fell downward still at its tremendous speed we had shot suddenly into open space, into a vast, apparently empty space.

"Through!" Darrell was crying as we shot downward now with the shaft's opening and the molten walls above us. "We've got through!"

"Through!" I repeated, unconsciously bringing our falling sphere now to a halt there. "Through—but into what?"

The Hidden World

FOR now, as we hung there in our sphere, our first wild moment of exultation over, Darrell and I were gazing out from our sphere's window with an amazement, an utter astonishment, that each moment deepened within us. For the space that stretched now about and below us was vast, gigantic! Just above us there was stretched over our heads, like a vast glowing roof, a titanic, far-stretching surface of glowing molten rock, a great molten sea of intense heat and light from horizon to horizon, literally, hanging above our heads like a strange sky of flowing flame! We could see slow, vast currents in that molten roof above us, could see also in it a round dark opening just above us, the opening of the shaft down which we had come, the shaft that led up to earth's surface!

And now as our eyes followed the giant curve of that fiery roof overhead, we saw that it marched away to right and left, all about us, like a great dome above us, like the dome of earth's own sky, but seemingly a sky of glowing fire and curving downward far from us on all sides, too, curving downward so far away that hardly could we glimpse it. Thus the earth was really a gigantic hollow shell that enclosed within itself a vast space that to our stunned eyes seemed immeasurable, almost! And it was inside this great shell that our sphere hung now.

We were within earth's shell! And that shell of a thickness of not more than a thousand miles even as men had found, grew in temperature with each mile of its depth, so that its inner surface was almost completely molten, a giant sea of molten rock clinging to the inner surface of earth's shell as unalterably as earth's seas cling to its outer shell, because the center of gravity of the giant shell lay somewhere within its own thickness! And that was why, I knew even in that stunned moment, that the



It was a city in which level was built upon level, numberless strata of streets and structures lying over each other, their transparency allowing the light and heat to penetrate to the lowest level.

molten sea of the giant roof that curved above us and beneath and all about us, did not fall upon us, since it could not do so any more than earth's seas can all fall outward into space. But the greatest wonder was to come. For of a sudden we saw below us as though suspended in the hollow of the great shell a great sphere.

A world! A world at which Darrell and I gazed dazedly in that moment, a great spherical world that was half the diameter of this great hollow space, and that hung beneath us at that giant space's center, motionless there but turning! A great world here inside our own world's shell, warmed and lit by the never-ceasing glowing light and heat from all the molten inner surface that enclosed the space in which it hung! A hidden world from which, I knew even at that moment, the flesh-creatures had come.

"A world!" my exclamation was stunned, awed. "A world hidden here at earth's heart, and never dreamed of by earth's peoples!"

Darrell's voice was as hushed with awe as my own. "A world in this great space inside our own world! And turning even as earth is turning, Vance!"

And now too as we gazed tensely down we could make out more features of its gleaming surface, could see that that surface was covered with vaguely-glimpsed structures that silhouetted in the light of the encircling molten shell. We could make out, too, the great outlines of some colossal greater structure on that world's surface almost directly beneath us, and could glimpse even from our height swarms of swift shapes driving to and fro above this strange world's surface!

I pointed eagerly down toward them. "Those spheres, Darrell!" I exclaimed. "Those gleaming buildings—it means that this is the flesh-creatures' world—that it is down to this world that they took Kelsall and Fenton!"

The Transparent City

DARRELL nodded, his eyes aight. "They're down here somewhere, if they're still living. But have we any chance to get to them, Vance, to get them clear and get back up the shaft?"

"We must try," I said. "In this sphere we can at least move about over the surface of this world without the flesh-creatures suspecting our presence. And if we can find some trace of Kelsall and Fenton, can get to them, we should be able to get back to the shaft."

"It's the one chance given to us," Darrell agreed. "And we must win through, Vance, must get Kelsall and Fenton back up to earth's surface, warn the people of earth of what lies here beneath them. Those buildings—those swarming spheres—they show the numbers and the power of these flesh-things, and already they have this shaft that will allow them to pour up onto our earth!"

I nodded grimly, gripping the control wheels once more, and then as I turned them our great sphere was falling again, humming straight down toward the great turning world beneath us. Crouching together there at the low controls, Darrell and

I gazed down toward that world as our sphere shot downward. Above us now the great molten glowing roof of this vast space, the inner molten side of earth's shell that enclosed it, was receding. It was only now, gazing out to either side and downward as we fell that Darrell and I were able to appreciate to the full the vast size of this great hollow at earth's heart, this colossal space enclosed by earth's great shell. For to us it seemed that we were falling through open space, a space bounded in all directions not by blue sky but by a great glowing, curving roof.

Within moments we had fallen so near to it that the turning world seemed to fill all space beneath us, shutting from view the other curving molten inner side of earth's shell that stretched far beneath it. We could see now that this spherical world was covered almost completely with strange gleaming structures, great and rectangular in form and rather flat, mighty structures between which there ran the narrow streets. And those streets gleamed even as did the great structures, in the glow of the molten sky surrounding this world. And as we dropped nearer we saw why they did so, saw that streets and structures alike were transparent! They were built of some transparent metal or alloy that made them seem like giant structures of glass, and as we came closer and closer through the flat transparent roofs and walls we could make out vaguely the swarming masses of great white flesh-monsters and the strange masses of objects and mechanisms that those buildings held!

It was a city in which level was built apparently upon level, numberless strata of streets and structures lying over each other, their transparent roofs and streets and walls allowing the light and heat that beat down upon this world to penetrate to the lowest levels! Here and there we could make out great well-like openings that dropped down through those countless levels, while almost beneath us upon the uppermost level there lay the greatest and strangest structure visible on this strange world's surface. This was a giant black shining disk, quite flat, that was fully five hundred feet in diameter, and beside which there lay a smaller and similar disk but a hundredth of the larger one's diameter. Beside both disks were a row of great transparent buildings or structures, crowded with half-glimpsed mechanisms which seemed in themselves more or less transparent, and with countless flesh-creatures. And this great disk was of the same diameter as the great open shaft through which we had come!

Even as that fact impressed itself upon my brain, however, Darrell cried out suddenly, pointed downward, toward the great swarms of spheres moving to and fro over the world beneath us. We had been humming swiftly down toward those swarming spheres without giving them attention for the moment, engrossed as we were by the astounding spectacle of the strange world. But now, as Darrell shouted, I felt a sudden stab of icy fear. For those swarming spheres had given way to all sides beneath us, for the moment, and up through them there had rushed a close-massed swarm of more than a hundred gathered spheres, a hundred spheres that were whirling swiftly straight up toward ourselves!

CHAPTER V

A World of Wonders

IN that moment as the hundreds of spheres drove up toward us, Darrell and I stared transfixed with horror. I could make no single move to escape them. So sudden and unexpected had been their swift rush upward that I could only watch them as one fascinated. Long before we could turn, could win back up to the shaft's opening, those spheres would be upon us with their blasting yellow rays. In an instant, it seemed, they were beneath us, whirling straight up, and then suddenly they had changed their formation a little, spreading out a little and swerving as they did to one side, and the next moment before I could comprehend what had happened were flashing up just us, up toward the molten curving roof far overhead!

"The shaft!" Darrell was exclaiming. "They've gone to the shaft, another hundred spheres—but why?"

"I think I know," I said, as a sudden idea occurred to me. "It must be that this hundred spheres have gone up to relieve the hundred guarding the shaft's mouth—that have been guarding it now for more than a day."

He nodded at my suggestion. "That must be it," he said, "but for the moment it seemed all up with us."

But now we were turning our attention back down toward the great strange world beneath, down toward which we were still dropping in our humming sphere. I gradually decreased the speed of our sphere until moments later, when we shot down among the swarms of spheres that came and went above the transparent streets and structures of this world, we were moving at a moderate speed. All about us now those spheres were swarming, and through their control-sections' windows we could glimpse the great white flesh-monsters inside them, at their controls. We took care to crouch as low as possible at the controls of our own great globe, and constantly moving as we were there seemed small possibility that any of the creatures in the flying spheres about us would notice our strange appearance, would recognize us as different from themselves.

As we shot among them, though, Darrell and I were surveying with intense interest still the features of the world beneath. A great and unending mass of gleaming, transparent structures and streets it lay reflecting the glow of the molten inner shell. The streets beneath us were swarming with masses of the great flesh-monsters, and as we saw their great forms hurrying to-and-fro, with a speed far greater than that of their clumsy movements on earth's surface, we realized that it was the smaller gravitational attraction of this smaller world, apparently, that accounted for the clumsiness and greater weight upon earth's surface.

Darrell was clutching my arm now as we sped on across this strange, teeming world. "What about Kelsall and Fenton?" he said, "how are we ever to find them here?"

I shook my head. "It seems impossible," I admitted, "but we must try."

He was viewing keenly the swarming scene beneath us as we shot on. "I think, Vance," he said,

"that if Kelsall and Fenton are still living, are being held here by these flesh-things, it would be in one of the lower levels, if only for safety's sake."

"But we can't explore the lower levels!" I pointed out. "Even here in the sphere above this world we may be discovered any moment, and to leave it and venture down there inside on foot would be suicide!"

"But there's another way we can try," Darrell said swiftly. "In the sphere we can get to those wells that sink down through the different levels—and perhaps get some clue as to their whereabouts."

I realized that the plan Darrell suggested to penetrate down into the strange under-levels of this strange hidden world was in fact to find our two friends. So, nodding quick agreement to his suggestion, I sent the sphere heading across the great transparent mass of structures and swarming streets, through the crowds of spheres that flashed to and fro above it, until there appeared ahead a great circular opening. It was one of the great wells that we had seen from above, a great shaft that sank down through the various transparent levels of this mighty world-city. And as we neared it we saw that down into it and up from it were pouring a ceaseless stream of great spheres like our own. A moment more and we were among them, were hanging over the great well's depths. As I turned the control wheels our sphere began to sink downward.

A moment more and we had sunk beneath the topmost level, and then, beside us, there stretched away the equally vast and swarming scene of the second level. A full hundred feet or more in height it was, from its floor to the transparent streets and structures of the first level above it which formed its roof, and down through that roof there beat almost unabated the glowing light and heat that fell upon this world! In this second level, though, were no structures such as rose upon the first, for being completely under cover as it was it formed in effect but one gigantic room which stretched like the levels beneath and above it completely around this turning world!

And it was a scene of strange activity that rivalled that of the top level. And as we could gaze far across that second level, we all but forgot the object of our quest in the unparalleled interest of the scene. For about us there stretched on that level such a great melange of mighty mechanisms and busy flesh-things, such a babel of clanking and humming of machines and whistling of strange speech-sounds, that almost were we stunned by it. And as we hung there, gazing from our sphere in fascination while other spheres from above and beneath us in the great well sped into this level or sped out of it, we could make out dimly the purpose of some of the great mechanisms we saw before us, could half-comprehend the true wonders on which our eyes rested.

Near us on that level was one of the mightiest of the great mechanisms, a tremendous squat cylindrical affair constructed for the most part of transparent metal, for the purpose of impeding as little as possible, like all the other mechanisms and structures in this world, the light and heat that fell to the lower levels. We could see that a great chain-

lift contrivance rose just beside it, an endless chain upon each few feet of which were great shallow cups or scoops filled with broken rock, rising up through the levels beneath by means of round openings in their floors. These masses of broken rock were automatically dumped into the uppermost section of the great transparent cylinder, where there played upon them from all sides a lambent green light of force that was conveyed to the cylinder by thick cable connections. Beneath this green force the masses of rock were disintegrated instantly into a fine dust, and as much swirled down into the second section of the cylinder.

This section was divided into several transparent compartments, in each of which there played an unceasing yellow ray like the electron-stream ray used by the flesh-monsters to annihilate matter. As the fine rock-dust entered these compartments it seemed annihilated instantly, seemed changed to a mere cloud of shining particles rushing down into the third section of the cylinder into similarly divided compartments where another yellow ray played upon each. And beneath this second yellow beam or force those half-glimpsed shining clouds of particles changed back swiftly into visible matter, different in each compartment. In one it became a fine gray powder, in another a milky white liquid, in still another a thin saffron fluid. And these poured down in turn from the vivid compartments into the cylinder's lowest section where they mixed together instantly under the force of powerful vibrators to form a thick dark liquid which was conveyed away by great pipelines of transparent metal to vast tanks visible in the distance.

This great mechanism, humming in unceasing operation, puzzled me for a moment, but then as Darrell and I glimpsed small flexible tubes and nozzles projecting here and there from the pipelines, and flesh-creatures now and then seizing those tubes and inserting their ends in their mouth-apertures, we remembered the same action on the part of the flesh-things above; saw that this dark liquid was their food, and gasped as we realized that the giant cylindrical mechanism before us was one of countless similar mechanisms we could glimpse that were making that food directly from the rock brought up from beneath! For that rock, we saw, was pulverized by the green force, then was treated by the yellow ray to make of it but a miscellaneous collection of protons and electrons, to separate the electrons and protons of each of its atoms, sending those electrons and protons down to the cylinder's third section.

The Secret of Transparency

THESE those electrons and protons were acted upon again in separate compartments by different yellow rays, were built up by those rays into the desired substances by causing to join to each proton the desired number of electrons, thus forming any element desired. And with the desired elements formed thus in each of the compartments, it was needed only to let them mix together in the fourth section of the cylinder, to form into the complex compound that was their synthetic food-substance. This much of the process I could fathom, as did Darrell, from what we could see before

us, though we knew that in reality it must be much more complicated than that.

Far across this second level Darrell and I could see scores of great cylinder-mechanisms like the one before us, each served by a chain-lift that brought ceaseless supplies of rock up to it from beneath and each swiftly converting those rock-masses into the dark liquid that flowed away to the great reservoir tanks located here and there. From which tanks, as I could see even then, it was piped away in all directions, carrying the dark synthetic food-liquid by force of gravity down through a great pipe-system to all of this strange world-city's lower levels, the whole countless hordes of the flesh-creatures being able thus at any moment to obtain the necessary amount of the food-liquid from the nearest tube and nozzle.

Across all this second level extended the great cylinder-machine and tanks, humming with activity and swarming with the flesh-things who watched and regulated the operation of the vast machines, but no sign was there that anywhere here were our two friends. So, with a last glance across the level, I sent the sphere downward again in the great well. Spheres were crowding thickly about us still in that well, halting here and there as they reached the level they desired and speeding away inside that level, but all seemed so intent upon their own course that their occupants gave to our own globe no attention. So, when we reached the third great level, a hundred feet farther down, we hung motionless again, Darrell and I gazing with eager eyes through it as through the one above in the hope of glimpsing some trace of our friends.

This third level, though, seemed much like the one above it, a great vista of strange great mechanisms lit by the glow from the transparent level over it. Here, though, that glow of light was perceptibly weaker and here the great mechanisms that were ranged about were of a visibly different nature. For though they were cylindrical in shape and much like those food-making mechanisms on the level above in appearance, it was not the dark food-liquid that these were busy in producing. Instead the electrons and protons that they made of the rock-masses fed into them were formed by successive treatments of the yellow force into white-hot streams of molten metal, which cooled swiftly into great ingots that were conveyed from beneath the great cylinders by moving belts or platforms of metal.

These great new-formed ingots, in turn, were thus transferred to giant automatic presses which in one motion changed them to great flat or curving plates of metal. What interested me most was the next step of the process, in which most of the plates and sections thus formed were carried along by their moving belts and between great tubes from which glowed a green force through which they slowly passed. And as they passed beneath the power of that green force, as it flooded through them, we saw the great sections of metal becoming transparent before our eyes! It was apparent that the green force was one that in some way altered the molecular or crystalline structure of the metal in those sections, making them as transparent as glass itself without impairing in any way their strength.

And as we gazed thus with fascinated eyes at this mighty clanging workshop, there came to me the answer too of another thing that for some time had puzzled both Darrell and myself. For we had, in all the vast swarming scenes that we had passed over and through so far on this strange world, seen none of the flesh-creatures sleeping or even resting. Even the hundred spheres that had patrolled the shaft's mouth on earth far above had been relieved, we guessed, because of the need to replenish the power of their mechanisms rather than to give their occupants a rest. And since there was no night, could be no night, in this hidden world around which on all sides there extended the molten, ever-glowing surface of earth's shell's inner side, why was it that none of the masses of creatures we saw seemed ever to sleep or rest?

But now we saw the answer to that question in a single creature who seemed to be moving slowly among the masses of the other busy flesh-creatures, stopping for a moment at each one. And as he came nearer to where our sphere hung, we saw that he held in his grasp a transparent metal container of some thin bright crimson fluid, and that with an apparatus very much like a long hypodermic needle he was injecting a swift shot of this fluid into each of the busy workers, a little below and to one side of the single great eye. For the moment the thing puzzled me, but then I realized that this was the answer to the sleeplessness of the creatures that this crimson fluid was one that neutralized in their bodies the toxins that caused the need of sleep.

Makers of Flesh!

IT was a world of wonders, surely, into which Darrell and I were penetrating in our sphere, but now after a last glance I shot the sphere down to the level beneath, to gaze along it also for some clue to our friends' whereabouts, a certain hopelessness had begun to fill me, a hopelessness that I expressed to Darrell.

"This immense world-city—these swarming levels—" I said, "it seems hopeless, Darrell, to search for Kelsall and Fenton in them."

"It's our one chance to find them, though," he said, his own brow wrinkled anxiously, "and we may light upon them yet."

"If we only knew where the center of government—the center of activity—of this world was," I said, "we'd have a chance, for if Kelsall and Fenton live they'd be near it. But as it is—"

We were silent both, a tense, almost despairing silence, as we sank down farther in the great well. Tremendous massed machines, hurrying, busy flesh-things, rushing spheres, clang and hum and hiss of sounds, these things stretched far away about us in that level, and in the next beneath it, and the next. Down and down into the great well we sank, hanging beside each level, and gazing across it in vain hopes for some trace of our two friends. And as we sank downward we noted that in each level that we descended the light that filtered down through the transparent levels above was feebler, duskier.

Yet still there swarmed in each level the busy hordes, the ceaselessly operating machines, while from level to level in the well about us shot the

rushing spheres. And from level to level up the narrow stairs that led from one to another there moved ceaselessly streams too of great flesh-monsters hastening upon incalculable errands. Like a giant replica of some strange anthill was this unutterably alien world hidden here at the heart of earth's colossal shell, and as we sank downward through its levels in the great well, pausing in our vain search at level after level, gazing across those swarming levels, we could make out vast mechanisms and contrivances some of which were quite incalculable in purpose, others being more or less clear in principle at least to our watching eyes.

We saw what we learned later were giant atom-disintegrating mechanisms which were fed with rock and with broken and worn metal scraps, and which swiftly stripped from the atomic structure of that mass of matter its electrons, separating them from the protons and forcing them into special compression-chambers in which other forces held them prisoned. It was these compression-chambers of prisoned electrons, as we surmised, that were the source of much of this world's power, since when released in special projectors those electrons formed electron-streams or yellow rays such as we were already familiar with and which could be regulated in power. They were used in a concentrated ray to blast matter into annihilation, or released in a broad invisible fan-beam from the rear of the spheres to drive them forward, as we had already guessed during our observation of the creatures above.

Upon a lower level we saw two great chambers or laboratories through whose transparent walls we could make out huge retorts and strange chemical apparatus, vast and complex mixing and separating mechanisms, tended by careful flesh-creatures. The product of those strange laboratories seemed to be a white, pulpy substance that for the moment puzzled us, but that we then recognized as flesh, as white flesh like that of the creatures who were making it! And in transparent-walled chambers beyond we could see their uses of that artificial flesh, those body-tissues which they created, could see them using them to repair the bodies of their own fellows that were mangled now and again in some of the great machines! For to these masters of the atom, these strange beings who had learned to change by super-alchemy any element into any other by the shifting of its atoms' electrons, the creation of these complex flesh-compounds was a matter so simple as to be carried out almost automatically by their great machines!

For a time that seems now to me filled only with a blurred memory of tremendous, incalculable mechanisms and swarming flesh-creatures and rushing spheres, of level beneath swarming level in this strange stratified world, we sank down. I cannot remember, now, all of the strange things of this hidden world. But at last, though, the last few levels lay beneath us, the great well's smooth floor a few hundred feet only below us, and we were sinking down past those last levels with hope fading in us.

Those lower levels, we found, were in effect a gigantic workshop in which the curved and flat sections of metal manufactured above, were combined with a myriad other objects and instruments

brought from the upper levels by ceaseless chains, to form countless masses of the great flying spheres. For as Darrell and I gazed out across those lowest levels, we were all but deafened by the terrific clangor of metal that came to our ears. As far as the eye reached nothing was visible but row upon endless row of great spheres, being assembled there by countless hordes of the busy flesh-creatures. Most of the great spheres, indeed, seemed already assembled, already gathered there in great rows and ready for operation, and as Darrell and I saw that we gazed for an instant at each other with startled eyes.

"Almost ready!" I whispered, as we gazed out through that terrific clangor of sound and ceaseless activity. "Almost ready, Darrell—all these countless thousands of spheres!"

A Conference

HE nodded, looking forth with me. "It can only mean that they're almost ready to surge up to earth's surface in their great attack. For they've pierced their shaft up to the surface, and now these numberless spheres in which they can rush up are almost finished."

Something of despair, I think, came upon us as we looked forth upon those tremendous preparations that we knew spelled doom for our own world. It was with that despair deepening in my heart that I sent our sphere rising upward in the great well, since it was plain to Darrell and myself that, wherever our two friends might be, it would not be in these vast workshops of the lowest levels. Abruptly, though, as we rose slowly upward amid the swarming spheres in the great well, there came something that for the moment made us forget the despair that had gripped us. And that was a sound, a great high whistling sound of immense volume and intensity came through all the swarming levels of this strange swarming world. As it sounded a sudden hush seemed to fall upon the activity all about us, all seeming listening to the call, even as ourselves. And as the great call ceased we became aware that though the activities about us had begun again, though the clanging of the great machines in the levels about us had not ceased, a number of the swarming spheres about us and above and below us seemed converging now toward a certain level in the well, toward the sixtieth of this great world's levels, and were disappearing from the well into that level. From all about, from all the other levels and from far across this world's topmost transparent surface above, spheres were rushing in scores in answer to that strange call, though save for them the activities about us were unchanged.

Darrell and I exchanged quick and eager glances of hope, as we saw those spheres disappearing in a great stream into the sixtieth and in a moment, with a last hope that that summons might have some connection with our friends, we were joining that stream of rushing spheres. Between the transparent roof and floor of that level, through a dusky feeble glow of light that beat down through the levels above us, onward we sped with our fellow-globes, in answer to that great summons, over and around the vast mechanisms and hastening works between colossal floor and roof for, mile upon

mile, a wild speeding for us through that vast and dusky level.

As we rushed on I was able to see that it was by means of great pillars of transparent metal that the great levels were held each above the other, was able to see that all these levels, all this world, were in effect but one vast gigantic workshop. And a workshop it was whose activity seemed never to cease, the flesh-things tending always their mighty humming and clanking mechanisms, their only pauses being to take from the nearest tube of the great pipe-system their liquid food, or to have injected into them, by the creatures set aside for that purpose, the crimson fatigue-neutralizing fluid. A vast workshop, indeed, and one that I knew was hammering out with each passing hour the doom of my own world.

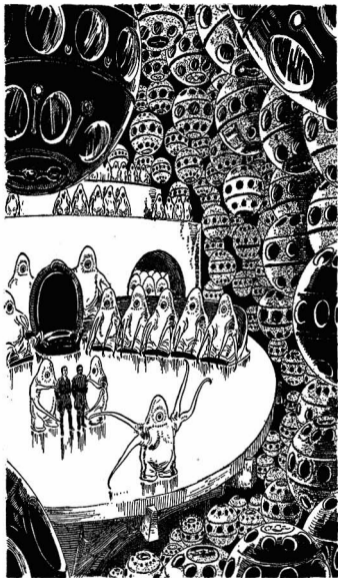
But now rushing stream of spheres about us was slowing, and as we slowed our sphere also, Darrell and I peering forward through its window with eager excitement, we saw that the spheres among which we moved were shooting out now from the level in which we raced into some vast and apparently open space that lay before us. In another moment our own sphere, with those directly above it, was flashing out into that space, and then we saw in that first glance that it was no open space, really, but a vast hall.

Kelsall and Penton Again

VAST indeed was that hall, a tremendous oval room more than two thousand feet in length, and extending through a dozen levels of this strange world. Beneath us stretched the great hall's smooth floor, and far above its transparent roof. And immense as it was it seemed all but filled now with spheres like our own, hanging motionless in great swarms of hundreds upon hundreds. Within a moment it seemed, the whole titanic hall was all but filled by the countless scores of spheres that had gathered within it.

In each of these spheres about us, we knew, were one or more of the flesh-creatures, summoned to this hall from across all this world by the strange great call. And as Darrell and I gazed eagerly forth to find the purpose of the gathering, we saw for the first time that at one of the ends of the mighty oval room there jutted forth a broad balcony halfway between floor and roof, and that upon this balcony were gathered a row of some twelve great flesh-creatures, seated and regarding the spheres that had gathered here in answer to their summons. So far away were they from us in the vast hall that the great creatures seemed tiny, almost, seen by us through the crowd of spheres that hung about us. And then suddenly a stir of movement, of excitement perhaps, ran through all those massed spheres as one of the twelve seated figures arose and stepped forth to the balcony's edge.

For a moment he seemed to regard the massed spheres before him in silence with his single great staring eye, and then had begun to speak, the whistling sounds coming out to us in the great hall loud and clear, sent forth, no doubt, by some amplifying apparatus. Slowly and deliberately he was speaking, to the massed spheres in the great hall before him, to the flesh-creatures inside those spheres, and though his speech-sounds were of course utterly unintelligible to Darrell and myself, there came to me a dim per-



And then they stepped aside, disclosing to view two figures whom they guarded and on whom they kept a tight hold. Those figures were Kelsall and Fenton!

ception of the nature of the gathering about me. I realized that those twelve creatures on the balcony must form the supreme ruling body of this hidden world, and that the flesh-creatures in the hundreds of spheres about me that had gathered here would be, perhaps, the officials or lesser heads of that world.

And, hanging there, it was as though Darrell and myself had all but understood the creature's strange speech, had understood that he was speaking to the creatures about us concerning the vast work now rushing to completion in this world's levels, the giant plan that these things had formulated to surge up upon our own earth. A strange sense of unctuality came to me as we hung there, listening to those whistling speech-sounds, and surely never were men in a more unreal and incredible position than we. Hanging there in our great stolen sphere amid hundreds of similar spheres filled with flesh-creatures who never dreamed of our presence among them! Hanging there in this great hall among the levels of this swarming hidden world that spun here in the vast space at earth's heart! Our situation was so grotesque, so nightmare-like, that as we seemed almost in the midst of some strange dream.

Suddenly, though, we snapped back to realization of our situation as the whistling voice of the great creature on the balcony suddenly ceased. Whatever it was that he had said, whatever orders he had given to the creatures in the spheres about us, we saw another stir of movement run through their masses as he ceased. A moment he paused, then was speaking again to them for a brief moment, turning then to give a short order to someone behind him. Instantly in answer to that order there emerged onto the broad balcony from the door through the wall behind it a half-score of flesh-creatures armed with the ray-cubes, and guarding with them some figure or figures that walked forward among them. They paused, near the great balcony's edge, an intense silence seeming to have fallen for the moment over all the great sphere-crowded hall. And then they stepped aside a little, disclosing to view two figures, whom they guarded, and on whom they kept a tight hold.

And those two figures were Kelsall and Fenton!

CHAPTER VI

The Origin of the Hidden World

IN the next moment, as Darrell and I gazed upon those two tiny, distant figures that had appeared these on the balcony at the great hall's end, my first impulse was to send our sphere flashing across the hall toward them, and with our own rays send their captors to annihilation. But in that moment Darrell's hand was suddenly strong upon my wrist, and though his eyes were as alight with excitement as my own, he was holding back my wild impulse.

"Not now, Vance!" he whispered tensely. "We've found them—but we can't make a move toward them now!"

"Found them—yes!" I said, my heart hammering. "But why have they been brought here—brought before these things?"

"We'll soon see," Darrell said. "Hold steady—and our chance to free them will come."

So throbbing that first mad impulse, I waited with Darrell gazing tensely toward the figures of our

friends on the great balcony. Their guards, moving back a little from them, now held them face to face with the great flesh-monster who had been speaking to us. And now as he surveyed them for a moment with his great eye we saw them returning his gaze, Kelsall's strong face drawn but steady, Fenton standing beside him with a hand upon his shoulder. We saw them, too, venturing a glance around the great sphere-filled hall, and could see that in their belts were no longer their pistols. Then as Kelsall and Fenton faced the great flesh-monster there, he had begun to speak to them, to speak to them for a moment in the whistling speech-sounds of these things.

A moment only he spoke to them and to the amazement of Darrell and myself, when he had finished, Kelsall replied to him in the same whistling sounds or in a human-voiced imitation of them! Replied to him in a few brief strange-sounding words or phrases in the manner of these flesh-creatures. There was silence for another moment when he had finished and then the creature, suddenly threatening and baleful in aspect, spoke to them again, several minutes in a long, deliberate exhortation of some sort. His whistling sounds, unintelligible to us, were being listened to intently by Kelsall and Fenton as well as by all the creatures in the crowding spheres about us. And when the great monster had finished our two friends replied to him instantly with a single whistling sound, a single phrase or word. And as they did so there rose from all the flesh-things in the gathered spheres about us a sudden babel of whistling cries!

Darrell and I gazed across the hall tensely as that strange and sudden tumult arose, precipitated as it had been by whatever answer Kelsall and Fenton had made to the speech of the great creature before them. His whole attitude in that moment was as eloquent of anger as that of such an alien creature could be. My hands tightened upon the controls in that moment for I looked for the thing to give an instant order for the death of our friends, so fierce and evident was the anger of all about us at whatever response they had made to him. Instead, though, the thing gave only a brief order to their half-score guards and those stepped instantly forward and still holding our friends, marched them back through the great door in the wall from which they had come. And then, as Kelsall and Fenton disappeared with the guards through that door, the standing monster on the balcony had turned back to our gathered spheres and again spoke to them.

Now, though, as we heard his whistling speech, Darrell and I were gripped with a tense impatience, for we wanted only to follow our friends and their guards, yet dared make no move toward that door behind the balcony until the creatures on the balcony were gone. Tensely we waited, knowing that with each moment the guards and our friends would be farther from us.

Then as with a final whistling order the great creature on the balcony ceased speaking, the spheres that filled the hall were beginning to empty out of it. Pretending to join them, I still held our own sphere in the hall, and in a moment more Darrell and I could see the twelve flesh-monsters on the balcony passing back from it through the great door in the wall behind it. In a moment they were gone, and in moments more the last of the great spheres had sped out of the mighty hall except our

own. Instantly then I sent our own sphere driving across the huge room toward the balcony and the great door behind it.

That balcony and door were set in the great room's wall just above the sixtieth level, and in a moment we had reached them, our big sphere still proving small enough to pass easily through the great door. As we shot through it, therefore, we found ourselves within the fifty-ninth level, that level being but feebly and dusky lit by what light came down through the transparent levels above. Before us there stretched away great rows of vast machines like those we had glimpsed from the well, those about us being engaged in turning forth metal ingots which were conveyed automatically to the great presses that shaped them into plates. Swiftly we gazed about us, but for the moment could see nothing of our friends amid all this swarming activity of flesh-creatures and machines of the guards. Then suddenly, as sharp despair seemed upon us once more, Darrell pointed away through great rows of the mechanisms and I made out the forms of the half-score guards, grouped still about our two friends, marching with them down between those two great rows of machines.

Instantly I sent our sphere humming after them, holding it behind them until, at a low speed, we were following them at a distance of a hundred yards or so. As we shot after them, curving now and then around some larger mechanism, we evoked no attention whatever in our sphere from the flesh-creatures busy in countless numbers at the machines around us, since scores of other spheres like our own were darting to and fro within this level upon errands of their own. And now as we followed our friends and their guards across the dusky-lit level, swarming with clanging activity, we became aware that ahead the great mechanisms were coming to an end, their long rows giving place to series of transparent-walled rooms of metal constructed in rows or blocks. Down a broad avenue between two such long rows of transparent-walled rooms the guards were moving with our two friends and slowly, dropping to a greater distance behind, our big sphere followed them, our hearts beating high now.

Most of the rooms on either side of us, we saw, as we sped between them, were storerooms of various materials which were apparently too valuable to be allowed to lie loosely about. Some of the rooms held masses of shining ores strange to us, some intricate mechanisms whose purposes we could not even guess, others stores of what seemed projectors of the yellow ray. In none of them, though, were there any of the flesh-creatures, and as we moved on there far behind the guards and our two friends, we became aware that the clangor and hum of sound from the great machines behind was becoming fainter and fainter and that in these blocks of store-rooms and avenues into which we were moving there seemed hardly any flesh-creatures visible. Then as the guards around Kelsall and Fenton, far ahead of us, turned suddenly into an avenue leading to the left, they vanished from our view.

By the time that our own sphere had reached that turn, had halted a little short of it, we could see along this dusky branching corridor that the guards had halted Kelsall and Fenton for a

moment at the door of a transparent-walled room, were opening that door. This branching corridor was too narrow for our big sphere to enter, and now as we hovered in the sphere there in that moment we saw the guards opening the door, thrusting our two friends inside, and then closing it sharply after them, tampering for a moment after with some device upon its surface. Then they had turned from the door, and two of the flesh-creatures having posted themselves before it, ray-cubes in their grasp, the remaining eight were coming back toward the main avenue, toward ourselves.

At once I darted our sphere backward, and as they emerged into the main avenue sent the sphere rising swiftly upward in that avenue. The avenue, like the rooms on either side of it, extended clear to the roof of the fifty-ninth level, a hundred feet above, and in a moment our great sphere had hummed upward and the eight guards, unconscious of our presence above them, were passing back along the avenue beneath us, toward the great oval hall. A moment more and they were lost to view down the dusky avenue, and then I brought the sphere down to the floor again, to where the narrower corridor branched from the avenue. Keeping well back from that corridor and out of sight of the two guards posted in it, Darrell and I gazed for a moment ahead and behind, seeing that about us were none of the flesh-creatures in this quiet section of store-rooms. Then we had turned toward each other.

"Now is our chance!" Darrell whispered. "If we can overpower those two guards and get Kelsall and Fenton out of that cell and into our sphere, we'll be able to make our way back up out of this world, up the shaft to earth's surface!"

"We still have our pistols," I said, "and with them we should be able to dispose of these two guards, at least."

"Yes, but no noise if it can be helped, Vance," he cautioned. "A shot is liable to bring a swarm of the creatures here upon us, and wreck all our chances."

Having seen to the magazines of our two automatics, we turned toward the round door of our sphere, swung it quietly open. As I crouched there inside it it came to me, strangely enough in that moment, that in all the hours since Darrell and I had entered that sphere in our mad rush into it at the great shaft's mouth, far above on earth's surface, we had not left it. Now, though, stooping a little at the round door, I took a quick step onto the great avenue's translucent floor, through which we could glimpse vaguely the swarming machines and creatures on the level far beneath. And then as I took that step, emerged from the sphere, I found myself rocketing smoothly upward toward the great level's roof!

In that instant, that moment in which I went smoothly up to the avenue's roof like one falling upward, such fear gripped at my heart as I had never known before. I heard a hoarse whisper from Darrell, below, and then as he stepped out from the sphere he was falling smoothly upward with me, until in a moment our heads had bumped gently in succession against the roof of the level, and then we were falling as smoothly and gently downward, lighting like falling feathers upon the

avenue's floor! Crouching upon that floor, far back in the avenue from the corridor of the two guards and our friends' cell, we lay for a moment with hearts pounding, finding now that each slight stir of our muscles as we crouched there caused us to float up for a yard or more from the floor on which we lay!

Then abruptly light came to me and I clutched at Darrell's arm. "The gravity, Darrell!" I whispered. "The lesser gravitational power of this world! You remember how the flesh-creatures could hardly move on our own world's surface? And it's the same with us, only reversed!"

I saw comprehension in his eyes instantly, saw that he understood, as I had suddenly understood, that it was the smaller gravitational power of this smaller world that gave each effort of our muscles such enhanced effects. Crouching in our sphere, holding to the controls and moving constantly to and fro, as we had done in our hours inside this world so far, we had not noticed this, but immediately upon emerging from the sphere and using our muscles it had become apparent to us in this startling fashion. Now, though, we strove to find some method of locomotion that was to allow us to move slowly forward along the avenue. After a few moments' experimentation we found that by lying flat and crawling slowly forward as a swimmer might crawl upon a pool's bottom, we could progress forward at fair speed and in silence. We crept down the avenue toward the narrow corridor that branched to the left from it, and in which were stationed outside the cell of our friends the two guards.

The Battle in the Corridor

IN a moment we had reached that corridor, and then, just back from it in the main avenue, we peered cautiously down it toward the two great flesh-monsters standing still at the door of our friends' cell. Through the dim dusk that reigned here in this level we could make out vaguely their great white shapes, standing outside that door with their ray-cubes watchfully in their grasp. A moment we peered toward them, our own automatics in our hands now and our eyes gleaming as the moment for action approached. Then I turned to Darrell for a last word with him before we leaped upon the two guards. And in that moment, as I turned, there came a thing which so astounded us as to leave us for the moment incapable of action.

There was a violent rocking and swaying of the floor beneath us, of all the mighty levels, the levels above levels about us, and as this whole strange world seemed to rock and quake thus about us there came a distant, thunderous booming detonation that awful, grinding roar continued for minutes before dying away. Then, as it did die away, as the levels about us ceased to quake, there came strange whistling cries from all about and above and beneath us, a babel of cries of alarm that were sounding out suddenly over all this hidden world. We could make out in the distance, through the dusk that enveloped us, hordes of the flesh-creatures rushing toward some point, and for a moment Darrell and I regarded each other with astonished wonder, then gave the thing up as the uproar of alarm in the levels about us died down somewhat. What-

ever it had been that had caused that tremendous shock and quake, that had caused the alarm of the flesh-creatures, we dared not lose time now in the plan of action that we must carry out.

So, creeping again to the corridor, we gazed again around its corner and saw that the two guards in it, shaken and astonished like ourselves by that great shock and detonation, were holding still their stations, apparently discussing the thing in their high, whistling voices. A long moment we looked toward them, reversing our pistols so that we held their barrels club-fashion, both Darrell and I hazarding a last glance up and down the dim avenue in which we crouched to make sure that none of the flesh-creatures were approaching. Then we gathered ourselves there, our eyes upon the two guards, and then with all the power of our muscles in our effort were flying through the air in a great leap toward them!

Fully forty feet down the narrow corridor from us had been those two guards, but buoyed up as we were by the infinitely smaller gravity of this hidden world, we shot down toward and upon them in a single mighty leap! And as we did so, as we curved through the air toward them, they had heard the sound of our jump, had turned swiftly toward us, their deadly ray-cubes coming up toward us. But before ever they could loose the brilliant yellow death within those cubes we had struck them, had hurtled down upon them and had knocked the cubes from their grasp. At the same moment I felt my own pistol knocked from my grasp by the great force of our own impact, and then, as weaponless as the creatures before me, I was struggling wildly with one of those creatures while Darrell grappled with the other!

I felt the great, thick arms at the big flesh-monster's lower body grip me tightly, bear me to the floor by all his great weight, while at the same moment I struck out with all my strength and with clenched fists at the features of the thing. As we rolled and swayed there in that flashing moment the single great staring eye, the strange apertures of the mouth, were directly beside my own face, within an inch of me, and almost those nightmare features so close to my own sickened me into a weakness that would have meant the end. With all the fury of desperate resolution, though, I strove to hammer the monster into unconsciousness, but though my blows for the moment made it impossible for the thing to voice any cry of alarm, I felt my strength fast waning. I had a glimpse of Darrell struggling wildly in that same moment with the other monster beside me, and then the one who held me had shifted the grip of his great arms suddenly to my torso, was tightening instantly upon me those arms in a spine-crushing grasp!

I struck out again, again, in that reeling moment, but my blows seemed to fall without effect upon the great flesh-mass with which I struggled. And rapidly, in that instant, as its great grip tightened vise-like about me, I felt my strength fleeing from me in stabs of excruciating pain, felt my senses darkening beneath those thrusts of pain. Then as from a great distance I heard a dull report, and a moment later another. And at the second the grip about me abruptly loosened, and as I staggered up from my antagonist's grasp it was to see him quiv-

ering in a last convulsion of death on the floor, the other already dead! Over them, panting and dishevelled, stood Darrell, his still-smoking pistol in his hand, with which when all hope seemed lost he had slain the thing with which he struggled and then the one that was gripping me.

Now we listened intently for a moment, but there came no sound of alarm that might indicate that our shot had been heard by the creatures in the levels above and beneath. Quickly now Darrell and I were racing a little farther down the corridor, were racing down toward that door which the two flesh-creatures had been set to guard, and into which we had seen our two friends thrust. In a moment we had reached that door, a tall door made of the same transparent or translucent metal as the walls of all the rooms about us. And there, pressed against its inner side, gazing with wide eyes up the corridor toward the scene of the battle we had just taken part in, were the two we sought, were Kelsall and Fenton!

"Darrell—Vance—!" Kelsall's astounded voice came out to us through the little ventilation-holes set in the door and walls of their transparent cell. "Darrell—Vance—for God's sake, how did you two get down here, down into this hidden world?"

"Kelsall!" Darrell was pawing eagerly at the transparent door with myself as he spoke. "We've come after you, Kelsall—after you and Fenton—we saw you there in the great hall, and saw your guards bring you here—!"

"But the door!" Kelsall was exclaiming, inside. "You can never get it open, Darrell—only the leader of the guards that brought me here is able to open its strange lock, apparently."

A Single Hope

BUT now, we had discovered for ourselves already that the great door through which our friends had been thrust into their cell seemed one impossible for us to open, seemed one like we had never seen before. For though we had seen that door open and close, could see now the great hinges to one side of it, the strange dial-like arrangement of a score of studs upon its center that seemed a combination-lock for it, yet those things were the only things that indicated the presence of a door there, since the transparent metal of the door apparently was entirely integral with the transparent metal of the wall in which it was set! There was not the tiniest crack to mark a division between door and wall, the door itself having melted apparently into the solid wall!

We started at it astounded, and then Kelsall was explaining swiftly. "It's the mechanism controlled by those central studs that locks the door," he said. "And it locks the door by making that door part of the wall around it, by using a molecular-diffusion force to mix and intermingle the molecules of door and wall at their edges, thus making of door and wall a single homogeneous substance. When those studs are pressed in a certain very complex combination, they reverse that force, and the molecules of door and wall are sharply divided at once, making it possible to swing the door open. But without knowing that combination, without using it to reverse that force, you can no more swing open this door than you can swing open

any section of this wall. And you can't use those guards' ray-cubes to cut through the wall, for those rays are of such terrific power that they'd annihilate the whole cell and everything, ourselves, inside it."

"But how to get you out, Kelsall?" Darrell asked in despair. "We have a sphere here and in it we might get back up the shaft—to earth's surface—"

"The only way is to wait until the other guards return," Kelsall said. "Their leader alone can open and close this lock, and they will come back for Fenton and myself in a few hours. The leaders of these flesh-creatures hold a last great meeting in their great hall, and we are to be brought again before them, since we were given only until then to accede to their demands, death then being the penalty if we do not. Therefore, they will take us out of this cell to take us back to the great hall. Then you and Vance and Fenton and myself must attempt to overpower them, and get away in your sphere. It's our one chance, for never will you be able to open this door yourself."

Darrell nodded. "We'll do it, Kelsall," he said. "And the first thing is to hide these two dead guards and our sphere—"

And he and I, turning toward the two dead flesh-creatures, swiftly grasped them and thrust them out of sight into one of the numerous store-rooms farther along the corridor, hiding them behind a mass of mechanisms in that room. We raced back then to our sphere, and entering it I turned on its lifting power, whirling its control over, sent it humming up through the dusk of the great avenue toward its roof. As it bumped against that roof, hanging there with the hardly audible hum of its mechanism just sufficing to keep the big sphere aloft there and out of sight, I stepped out of it and floated down to the avenue's surface. Then, with all prepared for the coming of the guards, and with the two ray-cubes of the two slain guards in our pockets, we turned back toward the door of the transparent cell that held Kelsall and Fenton, and hid outside that door in the corridor's feeble dusk, our voices conversing through the ventilating-apertures in low tones.

"Darrell—Vance—," Kelsall was saying. "Fenton and I were utterly astounded when we heard your combat in the corridor, looked out to see you two fighting with the two guards. How did you ever get down here—down into this world at earth's heart—down through this world's maze of swarming levels to find us?"

"We saw you two captured by the flesh-creatures there when they came up to earth's surface in their spheres—" Darrell said, and then related the events that had followed, our resolve to follow and rescue our two friends, our thrilling theft of the great sphere and our wild fight down the mighty shaft in it, battling with the two pursuing spheres; our bursting down through the molten fires about the shaft into this vast space at our earth-shell's interior, our rush down toward the hidden world at its center and our vain search up and down its swarming levels in our sphere until, following the other spheres into the great hall, we had seen Kelsall and Fenton questioned there and had followed their guards and themselves to this cell in which we had found them, slaying their two guards at the door to reach them.

Kelsall and Fenton listened in astonishment to this strange tale of our wild journey down after them, and when Darrell had finished Kelsall shook his head. "I never imagined that you two would venture down here after us," he said. "But you have done it, and if we four can escape back again we can bring to our own earth a warning, at least, of this menace."

"But warning of what?" I asked swiftly. "What are these strange flesh-creatures, Kelsall, what their plans? We have seen the shaft they've pierced up to earth's surface, we have seen the vast fleet of spheres they've built and have surmised that they mean to send some great invading party up to earth's surface, but why? Why should they leave this hidden world of which none on earth's surface has ever dreamed—which seems incredible to me almost even now? What were the four great light-shafts that they sent up through earth's shell at four different spots on earth's equator, and that we four came to investigate? What was that great shock that made all this world reel but minutes ago? We heard you and Fenton reply to the creatures in their own whistling speech there in the great hall, though I cannot comprehend how you have learned it in the hours that you have been down here, and so you must know the answer to some, at least, of these mysteries!"

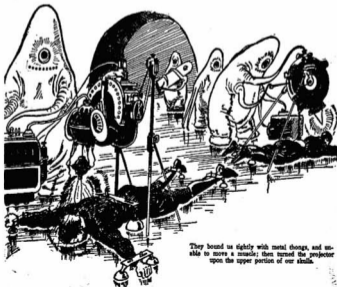
Kelsall's Tale

KELSALL was silent for a moment, regarding me with a strange solemnity through the transparent door. When he spoke his voice was grave, deep-toned.

"I know the answer to those mysteries, Vance," he said, "know now the answer to the mystery that puzzled us above, to the greater mysteries that we have penetrated into here. And so that you may come to know them also, it is necessary that you and Darrell know what befell Fenton and myself after our capture there above.

"You saw us captured on the bare clearing's tip, and after a futile questioning in their strange speech, thrust into one of their spheres. I saw you rising to come to our aid then but waved you back because I knew that you would be captured like ourselves or killed. So we were thrust into one of the great spheres, closely guarded by our captors, and then our sphere and the score or more that were about it there on the ground were rising up and then sinking into the great shaft, leaving the hundred or more patrolling watchfully above and leaving three to guard the mouth of the shaft on the ground about it.

"Down into that great shaft we sank, dropping at terrific speed with the light-beams of all the spheres flashing, whirling down at such terrific velocity that I knew within moments that we had dropped many miles beneath the surface. Then moments later in our terrific drop there came the glowing heat about us, and then as the glowing light and heat showed beneath us we were shooting down through that awful light and heat. Then finally they moved a knob and the wall and the sphere became cooler. Between the great shaft's walls grown molten now and out at last into this vast space that lies in the interior of the great shell of earth we moved. Astounded, Fenton and



They bound us tightly with metal thongs, and unable to move a muscle; then turned the projector upon the upper portion of our skulls.

I stared as our spheres sank down toward the world that spun at this great space's center and through the opening in the great hall's roof, our spheres poising at the edge of the great balcony there, our guards leading us forth onto it. They kept close hold upon us and as we stepped out of the sphere we saw why: that the smaller force of gravitation upon this world, less even than it seemed it should have been, made our efforts produce greater results, made each step of Fenton and myself send us floating upward."

"It was to halt this, though, to keep us with them, that the guards held us closely and watchfully, and if you saw us there in the great hall yourselves you must have seen them holding us thus. At that time, though, the great hall was quite empty, but in a moment there came onto that balcony to survey us the twelve flesh-creatures who form what might be termed the highest executive committee of this strange civilization. They surveyed us and the foremost spoke to us in their whistling speech, but of course we did not understand. He turned then and gave an order to our guards, who led us away at once. We walked quite naturally when held down by them. They led us to this storeroom whose strange and powerful lock made it suitable as a prison-cell for us.

"Here, after a little time, there came to us with guards, three flesh-creatures bearing a conical projector of some sort connected to masses of intricate apparatus. They bound us tightly with metal thongs, lying flat on the floor, unable to move a muscle; then turned this projector upon a certain portion of the back upper portion of my skull. There was a droning of apparatus being turned on, I felt some invisible but powerful force pouring from that projector into my brain, and then as the three flesh-creatures altered with wonderful swiftness and skill the controls of their strange apparatus, increased and decreased the intensity of the force acting upon me, I felt a comprehension of the whistling speech-sounds in which they conversed coming upon me! I felt myself understanding, more and more, as that force played upon my brain, the meaning of that strange whistling speech!

"It was but moments, astounded as I was, before I realized what they were doing. You know that the brain is the organ that stores and acquires our knowledge, and that each new thing we learn is registered in our brains by a subtle, infinitely subtle, change in a portion of its structure, in its folds. The tiny change in the brain's structure is, therefore, the register of our knowledge, since if that change is existent it will affect all the rest of the brain's structure. And if we knew the exact change produced in the brain by learning a certain fact, and could take someone ignorant of that fact and make that exact change in their brain, that person would at once know that fact perfectly without ever having heard of it. I would simply mean that the fact had been impressed upon his brain directly instead of indirectly through his visual or auditory nerves.

"It was this fact, one foreshadowed even in our own world by certain experiments of our psychologists, which the flesh-creatures were using to give me an instant and perfect understanding of their strange whistling speech. For their force projected

upon my brain was altering the very structure of my brain subtly, was altering it to correspond exactly to the alteration that would have been made had I actually spent months in learning that speech. For when they turned off the force finally, when I arose, it was to find that I understood their speech perfectly, and that I could speak it to them in a crude fashion, my human vocal apparatus not being capable of making all of their whistling sounds. In Fenton, too, the same thing had been accomplished, and then the flesh-creatures who had wrought that swift change in us, had given us that swift knowledge, were conversing at once with us.

"They told us, in that speech, that within a few hours we should be taken back before those ruling twelve, now that we could speak to and answer them. They would question us concerning all phases of life on the earth above; the numbers and powers of its peoples, desiring especially to know whether any above suspected the existence of this world hidden at earth's heart, and also what it had been that had brought us to the exact spot on earth's surface where they had pierced their great shaft upward. Fenton and I, however, told them but little, for we planned to help them with no information. We did, though, in the guise of conversing with them openly, strive to gain from them information as to the great mysteries of this strange world and its peoples and their plans. And they, seeming not to care if we learned, told us openly enough of the history and the purpose of their great flesh-creature races.

The History of the Hidden World

"**T** was in amazement that we heard that history. For these flesh-creatures existed here on this spinning world at earth's heart were, we learned, a race older by far than any race on earth's surface, and their world a world older than the great shell of earth that enclosed it! And as we heard from them how that world had been formed, in the far past, as we learned from them the answers to all those great enigmas that had perplexed us, we forgot almost our own predicament in the interest of what we were hearing—the stupendous life-story of this hidden world!

"Ages, unthinkable ages before, they said, our sun, our star, had moved along through space, with no planets, a giant flaming single sun. Eons it had moved alone, until there came a time when three approached, out of the galaxy's vast swarm of stars another star, a sun heading through space in the general direction of our own sun, passing our own sun at a vast distance, yet one which was but small compared to the usual distances between the stars. And as they passed the tremendous gravitational attraction of the two suns had raised upon each other great tides, colossal flaming tides of glowing gases. So immense were those tides, indeed, that when the two suns had finally passed each other, were receding from each other, the tides which they had raised did not recede but swept onward and broke loose entirely in flaming masses from their giant suns! And as those vast flaming masses broke from our own sun they began to circle around it, held still within its group.

"In this tale of the flesh-creature scientists, indeed, I recognized the accepted theory of the birth of the sun's planets of our own scientists, the theory put

forth by Chamberlin and Moulton and by Jeans and Jeffreys, in England. And, as the flesh-creatures said, those great flaming masses began to condense with time into planets, into great planets spinning about their far greater sun. There were still, though, immense masses of the flaming gases still free, still moving about the sun themselves, but planets had been formed. That planet that had formed at the distance from the sun

into meteoric materials, those great clouds of meteoric matter began to be attracted and caught and held by the new-formed planets. Neptune, farthest out of all, caught only enough to form one moon which revolves about it. Uranus enough to form at least four moons. Saturn, toward which great masses of the meteoric material had chanced to be flying, gripped enough to form around itself the giant rings, as well

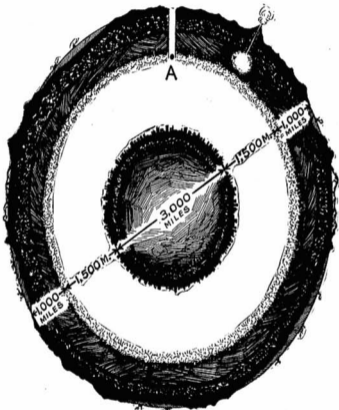


Illustration of the author's conception of the earth's shell with the "Hidden World" within it. At "A" the great battle between the defenders of the earth and the invaders took place.

where earth is now, though, was much smaller than earth is now, was a small spherical world, was, in fact, this very hidden world!

"Thus the sun had its eight new-formed planets, Mercury, Venus and the others, only where earth is now was only this smaller world. And since, as I have said, there moved through the solar system still vast masses of loose flaming gases, condensing swiftly

as a number of large moons and some smaller ones. Jupiter, too, gripped much of the material, forming four great moons and a number of smaller ones also. Between Jupiter and Mars a great belt of this meteoric material formed of itself, turning itself about the sun and existing there now. Mars, being out of the path of most of the great meteoric material masses, caught only its two little moons, hardly greater than meteors

themselves.

"But this little world that revolved where earth now revolves lay in the path of great masses of the wandering matter, and so caught quickly to itself immense quantities of that matter. They formed about it much as the similar masses had formed about Saturn, encircling the little world completely without touching it. Only, since this world was so much smaller than Saturn, they encircled it on all sides as well as on one plane, encircled it as a giant shell instead of as a ring! Formed about it, indeed, a colossal globular shell, hiding it forever from the sun and from outer space. This giant spherical shell that had a thickness of 1,000 miles is our own earth."

CHAPTER VII

How the Hidden World Evolved

"NOW this vast earth-shell," Kelsall continued after a pause, "that had thus formed itself around the smaller world was of necessity almost wholly molten and fiery, from the tremendous heat generated by the rush of its meteoric materials together to form that great shell. But the world hidden within it, which had been formed before the forming of that shell, had already condensed and cooled somewhat, and as it cooled and solidified still farther its elements and vapors cooled into water, into seas that swept its surface while the vast shell of earth around it was still glowing and molten. Air had formed too from those condensing vapors, an atmosphere that filled all the vast space inside earth, and with air and water, with the ceaseless light and heat beating upon it from the great molten shell of earth enclosing it, there came at last to form upon this hidden world the first crude forms of life.

"In the seas they formed, beginning with the first jelly-like organisms evolving out of the changing sea-silt's elements—the first protoplasm that evolved slowly as ages passed into higher and higher forms until at last many creatures moved upon the lands of this central world while the great earth-shell was still almost wholly molten. Another great mass of the meteoric material had been caught by earth as it wandered through earth's orbit, and that mass had condensed into earth's circling moon. But though earth's outer surface gradually cooled and solidified, though there began upon its outer surface the same condensations of vapors and formation of seas, its inner surface was still molten, flaming, and in the heat of that inner surface the hidden world flourished, lit and warmed perpetually by the molten sphere about it. And at last, out of the great races of strange creatures that moved on the hidden world, there rose to dominance the one race of these flesh-creatures, strange creatures who were the product of the ages of evolutionary changes that had taken place there on the hidden world, and who with more and more intelligence ruled that world.

"So that, long before any life had appeared on earth's surface, the flesh-creatures had waxed to great power and intelligence on the hidden world within the earth. They built strange cities upon the hidden world, cities that grew even larger as their numbers increased until at last they were forced to cover all their world with a single great city or mass of structures. And as time went on they raised

over that city another mass or level of structures, constructing it as much as possible from transparent metal so as to allow the level beneath to receive some share of the light and heat from the enclosing molten shell. So, through the centuries, they had added level after level to their city, their world, until at last all this hidden world lay as it now lies, with over it a hundred great levels in which swarm the masses of the flesh-creatures. And in those levels, upon this world, the flesh-creatures continued to live on for century after century, age upon age. Far above on earth's surface had come the first stirrings of life also, the first forming of changing, ascending species that in time were dominated by the rising races of man. But the flesh-creatures, on their world, had no interest in the conditions of earth's surface and so never ventured on to it.

"But at last, after age upon age of safe and uneventful existence upon their hidden world, the flesh-creatures came to realize that the end of that world was at hand, that soon the hidden world would perish and with it all their races. And the reason for that was a quite logical one. When this smaller world had been first enclosed by the earth-shell, by the great shell of meteoric material that had formed around it, it had moved about the sun in the same orbit as earth follows now, but had not rotated itself at all. This earth-shell that had formed around it, though, rotated or spun from the first, formed as it was by the meteoric masses rushing in whirl-pool-wise around the smaller world. So that when it had first been formed, earth consisted of a great shell which rotated once each twenty-four hours, just as it does now, and a hidden world inside that did not rotate at all.

"But gradually, in the following ages, this hidden central world had begun to rotate also! For the great shell rotating around it pulled at it with a great gravitational attraction as it revolved, the gravitational attraction of shell and central world being in reality a connection between them. And because of that connection, just as though it were solid and visible, the hidden inner world had begun to slowly rotate in the same direction as the rotating earth-shell around it. Only very slowly at first did it spin thus, but as age followed age the rate of its spin steadily increased, accelerated always by the constant pull of the spinning earth-shell around it. And so at last, but short months ago, it became evident to the flesh-creatures that their inner world was spinning at almost the same speed as earth's shell around it, and that it would spin faster and faster still as time went on until that spinning would end in its own annihilation!

"For the flesh-creatures calculated that within months, when the hidden world should have reached a certain speed of rotation, it could no longer hold together! For, you must remember, the gravitational attraction of this small hidden world upon its own matter was but small in the first place, and its matter was under the ceaseless gravitational pull of all the great shell of earth around it. Now with that shell pulling its matter outward with great force, and with the increased centrifugal force of the spinning world tending ever more strongly to hurl its own substance outward, it was plain that before the hidden world should have reached a speed of rotation equal to that of the earth-shell around it, it would have broken up! Would break up, in fact, like a bursting fly-wheel, all the matter

flying off in tremendous masses into the molten inner shell of earth!

Facing Catastrophe

THAT meant annihilation, indeed, for the flesh-creatures and all their world. So now they strove with all their power and craft to devise some way to escape that annihilation. They decided, at last, that but one method of escape was open to them, and that was to surge up to the surface of earth's great shell in all their hordes.

"But there was another group among them that believed that the speed of rotation could be lessened and the world be saved. They wanted to effectually brake the speed. They did not believe that their race could exist on the surface of the earth where many conditions would be different.

"So making use of their knowledge they set to work tampering with atomic structure to get forces powerful enough to stop the mad rotation of their world. And they had almost succeeded when they found that the atomic energy they had released was causing convulsions in the structure of their world. That the disintegrating atom was affecting its neighbor and with great rapidity their world was being slowly shattered. Those rumbles that you heard were the signs of it. They are becoming more and more severe.

"So you can imagine these creatures finding that instead of thousands of years in which to prepare for the natural ending of their world they have literally advanced its date so that now it hangs over them ready to end them any moment. When the end will come no one knows.

"The earth-shell, they knew, would not be affected by the bursting of the hidden world inside it, save for a great shock, perhaps. And upon earth's surface they could live, they knew, for though they would be able to move there only with great efforts, they could use their mechanical ingenuity to spare them the necessity of muscular efforts. At any rate, their last chance lay in emigrating *en masse* to earth's surface at once.

"Their decision was made, therefore, the decision that all of the flesh-creature hordes should pour up onto earth's surface. With their instruments of distance-vision they had, more than once in past centuries, gazed upon earth's surface and had seen that upon it ruled the swarming races of men, but they knew that with their great spheres and deadly rays they could annihilate those races. So they began their plans to pierce a great shaft upward through earth's shell, by using a great disk-projector which would shoot upward from their hidden world a giant yellow beam that in a moment would cut a shaft through the earth. That big disk-projector they had erected exactly upon the equator of their own inner world, so that its beams would pierce a shaft up that would have its mouth or opening exactly upon earth's equator also, since used as they were to the ceaseless light and heat of their world the flesh-creatures planned to take no chances of emerging at the first into earth's colder regions. All was ready to pierce their shaft upward, but one problem faced them still. And that was, at what exact spot on earth's equator should their great shaft emerge?

"It was a problem of great importance, to them. For you see that if their great shaft was driven suddenly upward in a town or city or some place

swarming with men, the alarm would spread over all earth and before the flesh-creature hordes could rush up that shaft human forces might have gathered about it to prevent them. And, too, should they pierce their shaft up through the ocean's bed, the result would be that a vast volume of water would rush down it and spreading out inside earth's shell would cause, by contact with the molten inner surface, great cataclysms of exploding steam that might well wreck all earth. It was vitally necessary, therefore, that their shaft be pierced up through some continent, and at a spot on earth's surface wild and unhabited. And to enable them to do that, to enable them to make sure that their shaft would be pierced upward at such a spot, they decided first to make use of the distance-vision instrument I have mentioned.

"That instrument was one that projected an intense column or shaft of blue light for any distance and through any form of matter. It projected also, at the same time, a smaller beam of white light that was supersensitive to all changes of light about it, the white beam appearing as a white circle or spot of light near the top of the blue column of radiance. Thus the white circle or beam was in effect a great eye, which recorded upon itself a swift and ceaseless picture of all things about it and which transmitted that picture downward in the form of linked vibrations through the blue shaft of radiance to instruments that enabled the flesh-creatures operating it to see things as though with that great white eye of light. For the white beam or spot was in effect, the eye, whose vision was carried along the blue shaft that was the nerve, to the instruments where that vision was reproduced as in the brain. Only, in this case, eyes and nerve were not of matter but of light that could penetrate all matter.

"So, beside the great blasting-beam disk which they had erected on their hidden world's equator, the flesh-creatures set up a smaller disk which was to project the blue vision-shaft upward through earth's shell. You must have seen that great and small disk when you came down over the hidden world. Then, but a few weeks ago, they put the thing into operation. They turned on the power of that smaller disk and at once a brilliant shaft of blue radiance sprang upward, through the great shell of earth to emerge upon earth's surface just at the equator. And that column of blue radiance, appearing as it did in the native village just north of Kismaya, was the first of the great light-shafts that puzzled us on earth.

The Flesh-Creatures' Plan

ONLY for a minute or so did they keep that blue light-shaft turned on, piercing up there near Kismaya, and in that minute they were able to see through it as though a great eye, were able to perceive with their instruments that that spot was one in which were many natives, many men. It was, clearly, not a suitable place for their great passage-way to be pierced upward, and so they turned off the blue ray and it vanished above. They planned, however, to send that blue light-shaft up again, through earth's shell at its equator, but so that there would be more chance of finding some spot suitable for their purpose, planned to send that vision light-shaft up through earth's shell at three more places, each a fourth of the equator's circumference from each other. By doing that, by examining

with the light-shafts four equi-distant spots around earth's equator, they would have a strong chance of finding in some one of those four spots, at least, a spot suitable for what they desired, a spot wild and uninhabited.

"They did not need to move their disk around their own hidden world to shoot the light-shaft up at a different spot. They needed only to wait until that next spot selected, a fourth around earth's equator, had moved directly above their disk. For as I have said, their hidden world spun somewhat more slowly than the earth's shell about it, and so by waiting for a number of days the next selected spot on the earth shell's equator would be directly over their disk. And within twenty days and some hours, in fact, that second spot was directly over their disks, since it took that length of time for the swifter-spinning earth-shell to gain a fourth of a rotation on their own spinning inner world. So when that moment came, when the next spot a fourth around earth's equator was overhead, they again sent the vision shaft stabbing upward, and this time it came through the Pacific on the equator, just south of Moram Island.

"They could see by means of it that that spot was on the surface of a great ocean, and that to pierce a shaft upward there would mean the downrush of great waters into it. So they snapped out their shaft and waited again, waited another twenty days and six and a half hours until the earth-shell around them had gained another quarter-revolution upon their inner world, until the spot another fourth around earth's equator was above their disks. Then they sent a third great light-shaft stabbing upward, and that one emerged in the broad open expanse of Pacific, emerging on the equator just ahead of the California. They saw that this third spot also was impossible for them, and so snapped out that light-shaft also and prepared to wait until the fourth designated spot would be above their disks. Meanwhile, in all their hidden world, every effort of the flesh-creatures' hordes was being used to construct the mighty fleet of spheres that would carry all their races up to earth's surface. And meanwhile also, we four, on earth's surface, had resolved to solve the mystery of these strange light-shafts and were making our way to the spot where we had calculated that the fourth would appear.

"And our calculations were right, as you know. For when the interval had elapsed, when the fourth spot on earth's equator was directly over their disks, the flesh-creatures sent their fourth light-shaft stabbing upward. Through it they saw, at once, the land and that it was as uninhabited and wild as they desired, a great jungle expanse about it. They had found their required spot, and so at once, snapping out the light-shaft of vision, they turned on the other titanic greater disk beside it, the giant disk that sent a colossal yellow disintegrating beam stabbing upward! And that beam, driving up with all its colossal blasting power, in an instant had pierced a great shaft straight up through earth's shell, driving that shaft almost instantaneously up and out of earth's surface before our eyes.

"Now at the moment when the great shaft was driven upward, the flesh-creatures had assembled and ready upon their world more than a hundred of their great spheres with their flesh-monster crews, all being equipped with the deadly yellow beams. And in the moment after the shaft was

blasted upward, these scores of spheres shot up at once from the hidden world, up and through that shaft at terrific speed, their light-beams flashing, up to earth's surface the first of all the great hordes of flesh-things that were to follow! For though the shaft had been pierced up and all was ready for the flesh-things races to pour up through it their mighty fleet of spheres was not yet quite finished, would not be finished for another day or two. So these hundred or more spheres were sent up to guard the great shaft's mouth, to prevent any who might discover it from giving the alarm or trying to wreck the shaft itself.

"Fenton and I running from them, toward the clearing's tip, were seen; instantly they were after us, captured us, and were taking us down as prisoners to this hidden world within earth. And when they had brought us down here, before their twelve rulers, those rulers had ordered them to give us at once knowledge of their speech so that they might converse with us. This they had done, by means of that strange brain-alteration mechanism, and when we had found ourselves able to understand them had told us these things concerning the history and the plans of the flesh-creature races.

Withering Doom

AND it was a tale, that, which Fenton and I heard with growing horror. For we saw that these beings could do that which they planned, could surge up onto earth's surface in all their hordes in their numberless spheres and in those spheres could sally out over earth and annihilate mankind. And our horror was deepened when we learned how near to earth was this doom of which we had just learned. For, we found, the last preparations were even then being made, the last spheres of their tremendous fleet were being completed. Within hours, within hardly more than a day, in fact, all those spheres would be complete, and gathered in the lowest levels of this strange world, the hordes of flesh-creatures of all that world would be pouring into them. And then those spheres in all their countless thousands would be rising upward through the mighty shaft onto earth's surface. And once they had passed up through that shaft, once they had emerged onto earth's surface, no power upon earth could stay the doom that would be mankind's.

"Almost ready were they to rush forth over earth, indeed, and they needed to be so since here in their hidden world their own doom was almost upon themselves! For it was fast approaching. Their scientists had calculated that within less than two days more, in fact, the long-awaited explosion of their disintegrating world would occur, and its great mass would break up, would go flying outward in millions of pieces. So they had strained every effort to complete their spheres before that time to rush up through the great shaft but a short hour or two, in fact, before the final cataclysm of their world comes, so closely were they pressed for time. And even as the flesh-things told me this there came a great warning of the cataclysm that was almost upon them.

"For about us even then the whole hidden world seemed to reel and quiver violently, while to our ears came a tremendous distant grinding and roaring sound. When that had died a great alarm spread across all the hidden world, through all its swarming

levels, and then a little later we learned from the flesh-things guarding us, what had happened. A great section of this hidden world had just then suddenly jerked loose from it and gone flying out toward the molten encircling earth-shell about us! And it was another such great throwing-out of part of this inner world's mass, without a doubt, that caused the similar shock and alarm but a little while ago, while you, Darrell and Vance, were creeping toward our two guards here. For as this hidden world approaches the point when it will break up completely, these great shocks are giving warning of that mighty, impending cataclysm!

"That first great shock, indeed, sent alarm over all the hidden world, made the swarming flesh-creatures in it redouble their efforts upon their great fleet of spheres that was almost now completed. For they knew that even with their greatest efforts they would not be able to rush upward and escape from the hidden world but a short hour or so before its final breakup comes. And also they were fearful now that if another great mass were to jerk loose from this spinning world and happen to strike the opening above of their great shaft through earth's shell, it would wreck that shaft completely and thus trap them here inside earth's shell to be annihilated by the giant flying masses when the moment of this world's final breakup came.

"So they worked on furiously at the great spheres. Our guards had told us that we had nothing to hope from any above, that the hundred spheres were still guarding the mouth of the great shaft on earth's surface, and so we never dreamed of you, Darrell and Vance, being able to get down here to us. We had been told, also, that another hundred spheres had been sent up to relieve the first hundred, the first party coming back down. For though the spheres can run for great periods, though the flesh-creatures with their fatigue-neutralizing fluid need neither sleep nor rest, the projectors that shoot forth the deadly yellow rays must be charged with new stores of the ray, new supplies of electronic force, whenever exhausted. And they knew that the guarding spheres above would be using their rays on everything that approached the shaft, on every sign of danger, and a relief party with full ray-charges relieves the old for the time being, the others coming back down to renew their own ray-charges.

"Hardly had they told us this, though, than there sounded out through all the levels of this strange world that great whistling call, that great sound that was the signal to call the officials of each level to the great central hall. For each level has its scores of officials and there is a single flesh-creature who rules over each level. Of these hundred level-rulers are formed the ruling body of all the hidden world, of all the flesh-creatures, and it was by them that we had been already examined. Now as the officials rushed toward the great hall in their spheres, hanging there in those spheres since in that way they could all enter the hall and remain in it conveniently, Fenton and I were taken by our guards there also. There, behind the great balcony, we heard the leader of the twelve rulers speaking to the assembled officials, telling them that the great fleet of spheres was almost finished but that they must put every effort into the completion of them within the next hours. For, as he told them, it had been calculated that within twenty-four more hours,

almost exactly, there would come the final breakup of their world, and they must needs have the spheres finished and be rushing up to earth's surface before that final cataclysm came.

What Hope?

"THEN, at his order, Fenton and I were led out onto the balcony, all the great spheres hanging before us there in the mighty hall. We never dreamed, of course, that you two, that Darrell and Vance, were hidden in one of those spheres and watching us. When the leader spoke to us it was to tell us that our world was doomed and that our only hope of life lay in the mercy of them, the flesh-creatures. Within a score or more of hours, he said, all the flesh-things in their thousands of spheres would be rushing up to earth's surface, to spread out over it and to loose upon man and the races of man an annihilation they could not resist. He said, though, that they desired to strike their first blows directly at the greatest cities of earth, to annihilate those cities and all in them with their countless spheres and their rays in their first attack. It would save time for them, therefore, if we two were to pilot their great attacking forces to those cities when they emerged upon earth.

"To that proposition I answered only with the flat refusal of Fenton and myself. For even were we to save our own lives, in that way or in any other, of what value to us would be a life on an earth peopled only with the monstrous flesh-creatures? So we refused, and when we did refuse the great leader of the flesh-things told us that death would be our lot if we continued in that refusal. For, he said, the rulers and officials of the flesh-things would assemble there again in the great hall just before their races poured up to earth's surface in their great sphere-fleet, ten hours from then. And if we continued to refuse then, he said, instant death would be ours. To his words, though, both Fenton and I spoke only a single word of refusal still, and then, as a great stir of anger swept through those in the spheres before us, the leader had ordered us taken back to this prison-cell to await that last meeting in the great hall at which, before their mighty armada rose upward, we would meet their demands or die.

"So we were brought back here, into this cell, and having been locked within it were left with two guards at our door. We heard and felt soon another great quivering and shock of the world about us, knew as we heard the resulting alarm that another mass of this hidden world's substance had jerked out from it, another great warning that the final cataclysm was near at hand. And then came a sudden wild combat in the corridor outside and we saw you, Darrell and Vance, whom we had thought far above on earth's surface, leaping upon our two guards. And so now, Darrell and Vance, you know what we have seen and learned in this hidden world since we were brought down captives into it but little more than a day ago, know as we do what doom these races of the hidden world, these great flesh-creatures, plan to loose upon our own races of men."

Darrell and I sat silent there, in the dusk of the corridor outside the transparent door, as Kelsall's voice ceased. Through that dusk I could see that Darrell's face was as white and tense as my own, that he even as I was in that moment realizing for the first time the full horror of the doom that was rising upon our earth. Then, his voice came sounding strange and thin to my ears.

"But is there any hope of halting this thing?" he

said. "Is there any hope, even if we get you out of here, of halting this invasion that will sweep over our earth?"

Kelsall slowly shook his head. "There is but little hope, I think. For even if we escape up from this hidden world to earth's surface, the hordes of the flesh-things in their spheres will be pouring up behind us."

"But we could at least warn the peoples of earth of the impending attack before that attack falls upon them!" I exclaimed, and Kelsall nodded.

"That is the one hope left us, Vance," he said. "Yet even if we can carry that warning to mankind I do not think, myself, that man can stand before the terrific attack that these creatures will loose upon earth with their rushing spheres and blasting rays. But as it's our one chance left we'll put our lives on it."

Awaiting the Hour

HE WAS silent, and were Darrell and Fenton and I there in the dusk of cell and corridor. In that corridor and those about it, through the maze of store-rooms and transparent-walled halls that lay about us, there moved still none of the flesh-creatures. Yet in all the rest of this strange world about us, in all the swarming levels about and above and beneath us, there seethed still the prodigious activity which Darrell and I had seen and which appeared now to be rising to a great crescendo of sound and activity as one by one the last twenty-four hours passed, as hour by hour that final hour approached which would see the flesh-hordes whirling upward. For at the end of that time as a limit, as Kelsall had said, their calculations had informed them that this spinning world of theirs could no longer be in existence, so that they worked now with an utter intensity of effort to finish their last preparations and escape from their doomed world.

Even from the dusky corridor we could glimpse vaguely, through the transparent walls and levels about us, the rushing movements of the hordes of flesh-creatures about us. It seemed to us that now the great sphere-fleet had been completed, since the great clangor of metal upon metal from the lowest levels was no longer coming to us. Now, though, apparently, the flesh-things were engaged in loading into those spheres the equipment and weapons which they were to take with them. We saw some of them busy charging the great ray-containers of their spheres, fitting those weapons back into those spheres; could see others who were swiftly disassembling into sections the great cylindrical machines which manufactured their food-liquid, the other mechanisms that turned out their metals, and loading those disassembled mechanisms also into their countless great spheres.

Once, too, Darrell and I were forced to shrink back from our position in the corridor as there raced along the avenue to the side of it a group of a score or more of flesh-creatures who swiftly selected the mechanisms they desired from the store-rooms beyond us, and loaded those into other spheres also. But they had passed beyond us and out of sight in the dusky halls in a moment more, the greater part of the mechanisms and the materials stored in the rooms about us being ignored by them. It was evident that they were taking with them to earth's surface only the essential mechanisms, those for the creation of food and metal and power, as well as their great weapons. For, as well we knew, with those mechanisms and with the science that was theirs they could swiftly enough draw out of the exhaustless materials of earth's surface what materials they needed,

could create out of those materials with their great electronic element-changing mechanisms what substances and forms they needed.

While all this last climactic roar of activity and sound went on about us we four remained there, Darrell and I outside that impenetrable transparent door and Kelsall and Fenton within it. And dark and strange enough were our thoughts then, as hour after hour sped by thus, as moment by moment the last hour approached. For we knew that only when the guards came to take Kelsall and Fenton before the last great meeting in the great hall could we hope to rescue them. And we know, too, that that would be but minutes before the assembled countless spheres and hordes of the flesh-things poured upward, so that even did we win clear to earth's surface by some miracle the invading masses would be close behind us. Yet we knew, as well, that, even had we been willing to leave our friends to death, we could not hope even in the sphere to win undiscovered through the wild uproar of activity that was now going on in all about us as the last hour approached, as the last preparations were made. It was only when all the flesh-things had entered their spheres, only at the last moment indeed, that we dared risk our break upward.

Once, though, in those last terrible hours in which we four waited with darkening thoughts for the coming of the guards, there came a break to the ceaseless activity in the levels about us. That was when, without warning, another great shock shuddered through the world about us, the floor heaving beneath us and all about us trembling violently as the grinding, immense sound came to us from far away. So violent was that shock, indeed, that the transparent metal roof high above us, the floor of the level over ours, bulged downward and cracked swiftly along one side, making us fear for the moment that a great section of it was coming down upon us. It held, though, and in moments more the great babel of cries of alarm that the shock had caused in all the world about us had died away and the work about us was going on more swiftly and furiously than ever.

"Another shock!" exclaimed Kelsall to us, his eyes wide. "Further signs of the end—another warning that this world's doom is at hand!"

"And at hand soon," said Darrell. "It's less than a half-dozen hours now to the last hour you mentioned—these flesh-things must finish swiftly if they're to escape from here before then!"

The Last Call

BUT that great quake that had just shaken their world seemed to have spurred the flesh-things about us, above and beneath, to even greater efforts. All about us we could now see them in the distance, working furiously to load the last of their equipment into the great spheres, rushing madly now to complete their last preparations. For they knew, even as Darrell had said, that within a few hours now their spinning world would be bursting into death, and that they must escape up the shaft to earth's surface before that took place. So, pressed on thus by utter necessity, they were rushing like insane beings upon their last tasks, were placing in the countless spheres of their fleet the last of their equipment and weapons that would enable them to conquer earth's face.

With a growing suspense, now, Darrell and Kelsall and Fenton and I waited there, as those last hours passed. One by one, each hour seeming ceaseless

to us, they dragged by, until at last but little more than a single hour remained before the moment of the last great cataclysm. By that time the last preparations appeared to have been completed about us, for now the wild clanging uproar of intense activity in all the hidden world's levels appeared to have dwindled, ceased almost entirely. We could see the flesh-things hurrying toward the great spheres, which had been brought up from the lower levels now and filled all the levels about us, apparently, though in the narrow corridors and avenues about us none were passing. We saw the flesh-things hordes pouring into those spheres, knew with a growing tenseness that the time of our chance, the moment when we could alone rescue our two friends, was approaching. Then suddenly, through the strange silence that had fallen thus quickly upon all the hidden world's levels, there sounded a mighty whistling note that shrilled through the air to our ears from far away!

"The signal!" Kelsall exclaimed. "The signal that calls the rulers and officials of the flesh-races to the great hall—it means that they're preparing to start upward, that we'll be brought before them for the last time!"

"Then at any moment the guards will be here for you!" said Darrell. "And now is our chance to get you free—Vance, you know what we must do?"

I nodded quickly, for Darrell and I had in those waiting hours evolved the plan by which we hoped to get our friends free and destroy the guards who would come to release them. With a quick glance out into the main avenue from which the corridor branched I assured myself that our own great sphere was still hanging out of sight against the ceiling of this level. Then Darrell and I waited, listening intently, crouching still against the door of our two friends' prison. The silence that had fallen upon the levels of the world about us was almost complete, now, but we could see within those levels countless massed spheres filling now with the last hordes of the flesh-things, other spheres of officials or the like that were rushing across the levels toward the great hall to which the whistling summons had called them. Then there came the sound of approaching steps, of a group of flesh-creatures marching quickly down the avenue toward our corridor!

Standing erect, we leapt to the corridor's edge and peered down the avenue, to see in it, approaching us, eight great flesh-thing guards, armed all with ray-cubes, the eight guards indeed who with their two fellows whom we had slain had brought Kelsall and Fenton to this cell. Already they were near to our corridor, and as we saw them Darrell and I leapt back toward the door of our friends' cell, and then, with a greater effort, leapt upward. Instantly we had shot up to the very roof of the corridor, high in the dusk above, floating smoothly up toward it and hovering for a moment beneath it. There we reached swiftly toward the great crack that had opened in that roof, hooked our fingers inside it, and thus hanging there high in the dusk from the corridor's ceiling, awaited the coming of the guards. We could have hung by one finger, indeed, so small was our weight against the lesser gravitation of this strange world.

Hanging there thus high in the dim twilight that reigned about us, we heard the steps of the eight guards approaching, saw them in a moment turn into the corridor beneath us. They did not, of course, give even a glance up toward us, but as they paused before the door of our two friends' cell we heard whistling exclamations from them, exclamations as though of surprise.

Their leader was looking about him, we could see, and it was evident that he was astonished to find that the two guards he had left before the cell's door were nowhere to be seen. I feared, in that moment, that he was about to conduct a search for them, knew that such a search would disclose their bodies in the nearby store-room where they were hidden and thus frustrate our last chance. But apparently time was so pressing now as the last hour of the hidden world's life approached that the leader dismissed the problem of the two missing guards from his mind, seeing that his two prisoners were safe inside the cell.

For after another glance around, we saw him turn toward the door, reach his tentacle-like finger-appendages toward the score of studs set at that transparent door's center. One by one he was pressing them, in a certain complex combination, pressing them for some moments until there came a sudden low hum of force from some mechanism set behind those studs. At once straight cracks appeared in the solid transparent wall, cracks that outlined a high door, and then the leader reached forth and had swung that door easily open on its great hinges, at the same time motioning Kelsall and Fenton to step outside. And as they did so the eight guards stood before them with their ray-cubes retained watchfully in their grasp.

But now as Darrell and I, hanging there in the dusk high above, saw Kelsall and Fenton step among those guards, we reached in our pockets, grasped our own ray-cubes which we had taken from the two guards we had slain. Quickly, with the little ray-opening pointing downward and with our thumbs upon the buttons in the cubes that released their rays. Then as Kelsall and Fenton stepped out among the flesh-creatures Darrell and I released suddenly our holds upon the ceiling-crack and dropped smoothly downward toward the guards beneath! As we did so I uttered a quick, sharp cry and instantly Kelsall and Fenton had leaped sidewise toward the avenue and at the same moment, as the guards looked swiftly upward for the source of that cry, Darrell and I had pressed the button-controls of our cubes and sent our yellow blasting rays stabbing down among them!

The Battle in the Corridor

THESE was a sharp little detonation from beneath in the next instant and at the same moment two of the eight guards beneath us abruptly vanished, annihilated by those rays! We had not dared to use the full power of our ray-cubes, since to do so would have blasted downward such a hole through the level's floor as would have given the alarm instantly in all the world about us. But we had at least been able to make the odds more even, and now before the astounded six remaining guards could collect themselves, could loose their rays upon us, Darrell and I were falling upon them from above and at the same moment Kelsall and Fenton had leaped back upon them, so that in the next moment we four earth-men and the six great flesh-creatures were grappling there in a wild struggle in the narrow corridor!

They dared not use their own ray-cubes in that fierce hand-to-hand struggle, we knew, lest they annihilate their own fellows, and for the same reason Darrell and I had dropped our cubes as we leaped down onto them. We had, though, at the same moment whipped our pistols from our belts and using the heavy automatics again in club-fashion were dealing great blows with all our force at the creatures before us. In that first

stunning moment of amazement for them we four had leaped upon them with such ferocity that the fury of our attack staggered them, sent them reeling back against the wall, one of them beaten down to the floor even in that moment by our great blows!

Only the immensely increased power of our earth muscles on this smaller world it was, we knew, that enabled us even to strive against those great monsters, but as it was we had already stretched one of them dead upon the floor with our terrific blows and were struggling toward the main avenue, toward our sphere that rested at its ceiling, despite the wild efforts of the creatures that had gripped us. Their ray-cubes they had

dropped at the beginning of our wild hand-to-hand struggle, but with all their great strength they sought to bear us downward, to overcome us. I heard a hoarse exclamation from Kelsall, saw that two of the creatures had gripped him, were pulling him down, overpowering him, and instantly I was at his side. Then, with a terrific effort that only our ultra-powerful muscles in this world's lesser gravitation could ever have accomplished, we four had gripped the massed five flesh-monsters before us and had flung them from us, had flung them with all our power back down the corridor through which we had struggled, back toward the open cell-door!

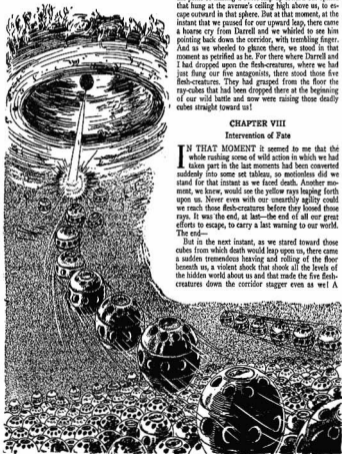
The next moment we had gathered ourselves, were on the point of making a swift leap up toward our sphere that hung at the avenue's ceiling high above us, to escape outward in that sphere. But at that moment, at the instant that we paused for our upward leap, there came a hoarse cry from Darrell and we whirled to see him pointing back down the corridor, with trembling finger. And as we wheeled to glance there, we stood in that moment as petrified as he. For there where Darrell and I had dropped upon the flesh-creatures, where we had just flung our five antagonists, there stood those five flesh-creatures. They had grasped from the floor the ray-cubes that had been dropped there at the beginning of our wild battle and now were raising those deadly cubes straight toward us!

CHAPTER VIII

Intervention of Fate

IN THAT MOMENT it seemed to me that the whole rushing scene of wild action in which we had taken part in the last moments had been converted suddenly into some set tableau, so motionless did we stand for that instant as we faced death. Another moment, we knew, would see the yellow rays leaping forth upon us. Never even with our unearthly agility could we reach those flesh-creatures before they loosed those rays. It was the end, at last—the end of all our great efforts to escape, to carry a last warning to our world. The end—

But in the next instant, as we stared toward those cubes from which death would leap upon us, there came a sudden tremendous heaving and rolling of the floor beneath us, a violent shock that shook all the levels of the hidden world about us and that made the five flesh-creatures down the corridor stagger even as we! A



From that new position our rays were driving shafts of instant annihilation down through their now huddled disorganized mass. A third of their number was annihilated.

great shock that made all the world about us quiver, giving rise to a far uproar of alarm, and that made the section of roof or ceiling above the corridor, above the flesh-creatures, which was already cracked, crack farther, break loose and whirl downward! Downward it fell and in another moment had crashed down full upon the mass of five flesh-creatures who held their ray-cubes toward us!

The next moment they had disappeared beneath that great mass of transparent metal, four of them crushed to instant death by it and the other one knocked backward as it struck him glancingly, knocking the ray-cube from his grasp! Backward he reeled into the corridor's dusk, and at that moment there came from above and beneath and from far across all the hidden world's levels, in which waited the countless spheres loaded now with the vast hordes of the flesh-creatures and all their weapons, a great far-reaching cry of fear and alarm. For it was another great jerking loose of matter from this disintegrating world!

"Up to the sphere!" Kelsall was crying wildly now. "Up to the sphere and out of this world—its final hour is almost here now!"

In a second we were leaping up toward the open round door of our sphere, hanging at the ceiling of the avenue high above us. Our great leaps sent us whirling up smoothly through the dusk like swimmers rising to the surface, and as we caught the edge of the sphere's open door, drew ourselves inside, I leaped to the sphere's controls. Its mechanism was still humming slightly, with the power required to keep it aloft thus, but now as Kelsall slammed shut the door I had gripped the two control-wheels and had sent the sphere leaping forward and downward through the great avenue. But even as I did so Darrell was crying out, behind me, and as I spun the sphere half-around, glanced for an instant behind us, I saw that along the avenue from behind, a score or more of other great spheres were rushing upon us!

My first wild impulse was to send our own sphere leaping forward in mad flight, but the next moment I realized that the rushing spheres behind us were not pursuing us but were of those rushing toward the great central hall in answer to the whistling summons that had sounded moments ago. To flee from before them would be to excite their instant suspicion, so, as they drew closer to us, I held the sphere steady with them, their occupants never guessing but what our own great globe held officials bound, like themselves, for the last great meeting in the central hall. Kelsall and Fenton were gazing tensely at the spheres behind us, Darrell ready at the controls of our sphere's rays, all of us crouching down to avoid the gaze of any who might chance to survey us.

"They're going toward the central hall," I said to the others as we shot onward among those rushing spheres. "They're taking us with them!"

"Keep with them, then!" Kelsall exclaimed. "If we leave them now it will arouse their suspicions at once!"

"And the wells!" Fenton cried. "The wells are shut out to us by the massed spheres gathered around them and waiting to go! We'll have to try to escape from the great hall itself!"

I saw that what Fenton said was true, that about those wells that led upward through the hidden world's levels were gathered now countless ranks of motionless spheres, waiting for the command that would send them upward. To force our way through them and up out of a well now would be to challenge instant dis-

covery, so with a strange dread growing in my heart I kept our sphere racing onward with those about it, toward the great hall. And surely that flight of Kelsall and Darrell and Fenton and myself, across this dim-lit level of the hidden world at earth's heart was without parallel. For all about us stretched those massed ranks of our enemies, and it was only here and there that there moved still outside of them a few flesh-creatures. A tremendous silence seemed to reign over all this world as its last great hour approached.

But now our rushing sphere and those about us were nearing their goal, the great high door or opening that led from the fifty-ninth level out over the balcony into the great central hall. One by one the spheres shot through that great door, and as our own followed them, I was aware of the twelve rulers gathered there on the balcony, surveying the spheres.

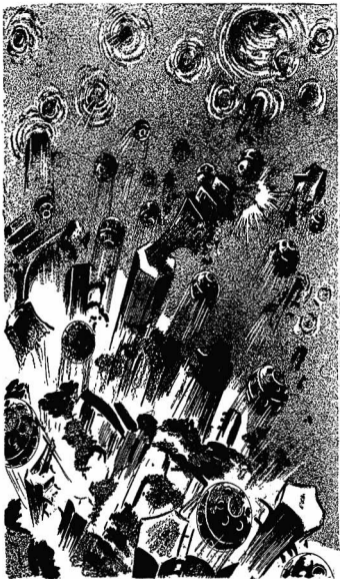
The Last Conference

AS unobtrusively as possible, I sent our sphere worming forward and upward slowly through the thronging spheres about us. The spheres were shifting their own positions slightly as though in anxious restlessness, as they waited for their last fellows to enter the great hall, for their leaders to speak to them. From the opening of the sixth level around the hall, now, the last of the summoned spheres were rushing into the hall, taking their places among the masses around us, but I knew that in a few moments more we would have made our way up through those masses to the opening above. Already hope was flickering stronger in me, but then suddenly it died. For the centermost of the twelve creatures on the balcony, the leader of the twelve rulers, had at last risen and stepped out to that balcony's edge. And as he did so all the spheres in the great hall had ceased abruptly their restless movements and hung motionless, awaiting his words.

As they did so I halted instantly the upward movement of our own sphere, though with a groan on my lips. For I knew that with all other globes motionless in the great hall about us our own, striving to make its way upward to the opening through them, would be instantly noted, and we as instantly discovered. So with the opening in the roof still a few hundred feet above us and with massed spheres between us and it, our own globe hung motionless among those others. Meanwhile the flesh-leader who had stepped to the balcony's edge was surveying the assembled spheres before him as we had seen him do before. And we noted, in that moment, that beside the balcony there hung a single sphere also which was of black metal instead of the gleaming metal which formed all the rest, and that waited there with its door open. It was, we comprehended at once, the sphere in which the twelve rulers there on the balcony would lead the others upward, up through the shaft to earth's surface!

The creature standing there at the great balcony's edge began speaking in his strange whistling tones. And as we listened, Darrell and Kelsall and Fenton listening as intently to him as myself, it seemed to me, despite myself, that in that scene was something of a grandeur of majesty of power that was none the less real though in no way human. The ruler was speaking to his peoples, no doubt about their great migration upward from this world that had been their home always. Awed despite ourselves we listened, and as we listened Kelsall, beside me, was swiftly translating to us the words of the thing on the balcony.

"He says," whispered Kelsall rapidly, "that we



There came from the hidden world spinning far beneath them, a colossal thunderous, roar. The sphere of the hidden world was breaking into colossal fragments.

flesh-creatures (I am using his own words) are on the eve of the most important, most colossal event that has ever occurred in our history. For numberless ages we have dwelt upon this world of ours, this world that lies at the heart of the great shell of earth. But now a fate has crept upon this world, which, according to our scientists, will cause its final tremendous annihilation. For now all about us there waits our great fleet of spheres that holds all our races, and in that fleet we are about to leave this inner world of ours forever, to burst out upon the outer surface of earth's shell and take possession of it for ourselves.

"You have been told, though, that that outer surface is peopled, and you have seen the two prisoners of those peoples brought down here, prisoners even now being brought here for a last hearing of our demands. These peoples of earth's surface, though, have not the science or the weapons that our older race has developed and they cannot stand before us. And the word which we leaders give to you now at the last, and to all our spheres and hordes, is to strike out with all your powers to annihilate all those peoples, from the first moment that we emerge onto earth's surface. Not one of them must we leave living upon the face of earth! For it is only by wiping out entirely every vestige of life upon earth's face except for ourselves that we ourselves can bring all earth's surface to our will, and can hold it for ourselves forever."

The creature upon the balcony paused, and as Kelsall finished his quick, whispering translation beside us I saw his face and those of Darrell and Fenton as white and grim with horror as my own. At those words of the great flesh-monster, though, a wave of wild excitement seemed to surge through all the occupants of the massed spheres about us, those spheres swirling and tossing about as from their occupants there came great whistling cries that merged into a single roar of strange voices. Fenton turned toward us, his face tense.

"You heard him say that the two prisoners were being brought to this hall!" he exclaimed. "That means that we must escape from here now if at all!"

"We've got to chance it!" Darrell agreed. "For they'll learn in moments now that their prisoners have escaped!"

Discovered!

I GRIPPED the two control-wheels, then looked upward. A great mass of spheres lay still between us and the roof-opening high above us, but now in their occupants' excitement those spheres were moving jerkily about, bumping to this side and that against each other, and I saw that it was, truly, our last chance to get out of this great hall. So, carefully and slowly, I sent our own sphere rising upward again, up through the swarming globes above us toward the great opening. With Darrell and Fenton and Kelsall as tense beside me as myself, I kept our great globe slowly rising, bumping each moment against the spheres above and about us!

Up—up—those moments in which we rose saw our hope rising stronger within us, for we knew that moments more would bring us up to and through the opening. Suddenly there rang out from the great balcony, over the ruler's voice, a wild whistling cry! A great cry of alarm at which we turned to see. There upon the balcony by the twelve

rulers, a single flesh-creature who had staggered out through the door toward them! A single flesh-creature whom we recognized instantly, by his battered appearance, as that single guard who had escaped the falling metal that had destroyed his fellows. He was crying something in his whistling voice, and as he did so there came another and greater cry from the ruler, and an uproar of wild cries and confusion seemed suddenly to break out inside the great hall.

Kelsall whirled toward us, his face white. "That guard!" he cried to us. He told them we escaped in a sphere—and they'll find us here in seconds, now!"

Even as Kelsall cried that, indeed, all the hanging spheres that had poised about us were rushing in confused swarms here and there in the great hall, their occupants peering into each other's spheres and flashing their light-beams into them, searching for us! And in the next moment one just beside us had flashed its beam through our window and a whistling cry of discovery went up from that sphere as its beam caught and held us in our own great globe! We were discovered!

"Up to the opening!" Darrell yelled, beside me. "Smash up through them to the opening, Vance—they've found us!"

But even as he shouted that to me I had whirled over the control wheels and had sent our sphere rushing at top-speed upward! Crash—crash—into the spheres above us we drove, flashing bullet-like up among them in that moment even as they whirled there in wild confusion! Beneath us, from the sphere that had discovered us, there seared upward a quick ray of yellow death, but before it could find its mark we were above it and that yellow ray had struck two spheres beyond us, had annihilated them instantly! But still we were crashing upward among the swarming spheres above us until in the next flashing instant I saw that a flat solid mass of them had grouped there above us to bar our progress, and since to crash into such a mass squarely was to annihilate ourselves I shot our sphere sidewise from them, dodging like light among the swirling scores of spheres to our right!

All the mighty hall was in such a wild confusion of mad excitement in that moment that all things about us seemed a mad panorama of wildly-whirling spheres as I drove our own globe sidewise. For all the massed spheres in the great hall were swarming furiously and swiftly and aimlessly about it like a great furious swarm of aroused bees! They dared not, in that moment, loose their rays upon us, upon our swift-fashing globe, lest they annihilate their fellows as one ray had already done. But no such consideration held us, and as we shot sidewise to avoid that solid mass of spheres above us I heard Darrell's yell of defiance, as he gripped our ray-control! And then glimpsed our sphere's rays driving out to right and left and above and beneath us, driving out from all the spheres six ray-openings and cutting dazzling yellow lanes of death and nothingness through the massed whirling spheres about us as we shot sidewise and upward!

That terrific moment of wild rushing movement and battle seemed extended in that moment to an indefinite period of time, and though our sphere was leaping upward now toward the opening like a rifle-bullet it seemed to me then to be floating slowly upward only. I saw in that moment the twelve rulers there on the balcony far at the great

hall's end, rushing into their own waiting sphere, and then as we flashed upward through the swarms around and above us, there was coming from all around us still the sharp detonations of the striking rays that Darrell was loosing on all the globe-ships about us!

Now, too, the flesh-creatures' rays were stabbing from all sides toward us, regardless of effect, but before they could reach us we were beyond them, rushing madly up through the swarming spheres until in a moment more the great circular opening loomed just above us!

But suddenly there came wild cries from Fenton and Kelsall and I saw that there had rushed suddenly across that opening a half-score of spheres that hung now within it, barring our path! Before we could use our own rays upon those spheres, I knew, their rays would have found us, so in that mad instant I put all our lives on one last mad chance, jerked open the speed control to its utmost! The next instant we were hurtling at utmost speed straight toward those massed spheres, and in another moment like an upward-driving meteor had crashed squarely into them!

CHAPTER IX

The Doom of a World

THE next moment there was an awful, reeling shock that flung us all sidewise, a great grinding of metal on metal, and then as I staggered up again I saw that our sphere was through, had crashed up through those barring spheres and was rising up from the hidden world's surface, into glowing light of the vast molten shell about it! For chance had made us strike just between two of those spheres, and instead of annihilating ourselves in it, our sphere's curving metal sides had driven the two spheres we hit apart, allowing us to drive in that instant up between them, up through the great opening!

"Straight up to the shaft!" Kelsall was screaming now to me above the rush of winds and the great humming of our sphere. "Straight up to the shaft, Vance—they're after us."

For there below, now, mighty masses of spheres were pouring up now from the gleaming surface of the spinning hidden world, were pouring up through the great opening through which we had smashed and out of all the great wells that yawned here and there across the surface of the world beneath us! It was the gigantic invasion of the flesh-things, surging up toward earth's surface at last! It was their great armada of conquest and out in the van of those swiftly-rising masses of spheres had leaped the great single black sphere of the rulers, and behind it leaped the swiftest of the spheres in pursuit of ourselves, all the countless masses of their globes pouring up still from the hidden world behind those foremost ones!

"They're overtaking us!" Kelsall exclaimed as he gazed tensely backward upon the rushing spheres beneath us. "They're coming closer!"

But already I had seen in a downward glance that that was so. For our own sphere, battered as it was by our wild crash upward through the swarming globes of the great hall, was not equal in speed to these unharmed spheres that were rushing up after us. And behind those foremost spheres, which were fully five hundred in number, there

were rising swiftly also all the thousands upon thousands of other globes that had been waiting in their masses in the levels of the hidden world beneath!

Up—up—it seemed to me that my brain was reeling as we drove upward with a tremendous speed and those countless pursuers swiftly after us.

Now, though, the dark opening of the great shaft was coming into view above us, and now the great glow of the molten fires in which that opening yawned was beating fiercely upon our rushing sphere, I opened the refrigerating controls. As we came closer to the great surging currents of those slow-flowing molten masses, I heard from them an increasing roar of thunderous sound, the awful roar of the flowing sea of molten rock. Then suddenly there came a cry from Fenton, and as I glanced back for an instant at that cry I saw yellow rays stabbing up toward us from the pursuing five hundred spheres close beneath us!

Those rays fell short, though by little enough, for at yet the pursuing five hundred had not drawn within the effective range of their great rays. Swiftly, though, they were coming closer to us still, were overtaking us, racing upward toward that roaring molten sea that loomed above us! Flight and pursuit more strange than that there could never have been, the flight of our single sphere and its four human occupants, the titanic curving fiery ocean of the molten inner surface of earth's shell hanging above us with its single dark round opening; the five hundred foremost spheres of the flesh-things rushing up close after us; the great rectangular masses of countless spheres that were rising also, farther beneath; and the swiftly-spinning hidden world gleaming there beneath them, hanging and whirling there at earth's heart!

I felt the last cold grip of despair closing upon my heart in those instants as we rushed over the last few thousand feet toward that round opening. Before us now it was as though all the universe was dissolved into a single curtain of dazzling, molten fire suspended there above us, a giant flaming sea, the awful roaring of which came to my ears with stunning force in that moment. I knew, even in that instant, that Kelsall was right, that escape was impossible. The five hundred foremost spheres were close beneath us, now, and though they had ceased to loose their rays for the moment, hardly able to perceive us against that awful glare from the fiery ocean above, I knew that they were overhauling us still and that once in the darkness of the shaft's upper portions they would blast us from existence with their rays. Our last wild chance, our last chance to reach earth's surface once again, was gone.

So in that single moment despair gripped me, and with the passing of our last hope it was as though something had snapped within me. I gave utterance to a hoarse cry of defiance, gripped the control-wheels in my hands, and then as our sphere shot up into the shaft's great dark opening at last, that opening hardly to be glimpsed even in the molten sea that roared about it, I brought the sphere to a halt, swung it around so that it hung in that opening motionless! So that it hung just inside the shaft's opening, the flaming molten sea flowing and thundering all about it, facing the spheres that were rushing still upward toward us from beneath!

"No escape for us!" I cried. "Then no escape it

is—no warning for our world. But we'll not meet death fleeing up this shaft!"

"You're going to—" began Kelsall, but my mad shout cut him short.

"We're going to hold these spheres and flesh-things out of this shaft while we live! We're going to hold them back from the earth's surface!"

The Last Stand

THERE was a single stunned silence and then the shouts of Darrell, Kelsall and Fenton had joined my own. Our sphere was hanging there at the center of the great shaft's opening, poised there with all about us the thundering, roaring sea of molten rock, whose awful glare beat fiercely upon us, whose great heat was kept from us by the refrigerating controls! Five hundred feet in diameter was that opening, so that the part of the opening which must be guarded to prevent the sphere's from rushing upward was not large. Now as I crouched there at our sphere's controls, Kelsall and Fenton tense at the window, Darrell hunched over the ray-control, we saw that the five hundred foremost spheres beneath had glimpsed us halting there in the shaft's opening, and had themselves halted beneath us, the black sphere of their rulers at their head.

We could see their occupants peering upward, knew that against the awful glare from about us they could not more than gain a flashing glimpse of our own sphere, and then as we hung there amid the roaring molten fires of earth's inner shell, there seemed a great pause. Then suddenly at some swift order the five hundred spheres had shifted swiftly to a long column that was driving at full speed up toward the shaft and our sphere inside it!

Up—up—in an instant the spheres of that column's head were looming great beneath us, but then Darrell pressed swiftly upon the studs in his hands and down from our sphere they stabbed swift yellow shafts of deadly power, that clove down through the spheres of that uprushing column and with a great detonation had shot scores of them into nothingness! As they did so, as the rays of the uprushing ships had stabbed in answer toward ourselves, blindly and aimlessly, almost, I had sent the sphere leaping to one side of the shaft a little, and from that new position our rays were driving paths of instant annihilation down through their now-huddled, disorganized mass! Before that awful fire from an enemy whom they could scarcely glimpse, a third of their five hundred spheres annihilated in that moment by our down-leaping rays, they reeled back from us shattered from the awful blow that we had dealt them!

I heard the wild exultant cries of Kelsall and Fenton, saw that the black sphere of the flesh-thing rulers had driven to one side, that in the spheres beneath was a great confusion. A moment more and those great, far-stretching masses of spheres had been halted beneath, holding their formation there thousands of feet beneath us and the molten sea in whose single opening we hung. Then up from those spheres had rushed others to replace those we had destroyed, and as these and the survivors of the first attack formed again into a solid column, they were hanging for a moment out of range beneath us and then at full speed were leaping again up toward us!

Up came that column of rushing spheres like the first, its foremost spheres sending their yellow rays stabbing up even before they came within range of us. But again they were losing those rays blindly, dazzled as they were by the awful glare from about us, and the instant that they were within ray-range our own deadly beams were stabbing down again among them! And as there came to us over the awful roar of the fires about us the detonations of our striking rays, we could see scores upon scores of the uprushing spheres flashing into nothingness beneath those rays! Could see their column reeling aside as we thus stabbed down through it, other scores of its ships driving in that wild moment into the molten sea about our shaft and perishing there instantly in bursts of flame.

"We're holding them!" cried Darrell as that second shattered column reeled downward from us. They can't get at us here in the shaft!"

"And the world below—look!" shouted Kelsall. "Another great mass of its matter is breaking from it!"

For at that moment, with another great grinding, rending roar, a great mass of matter had shot out from the spinning world far beneath, a great section gouged suddenly to all seeming out of the gleaming levels of that world and hurtling out, hurtling out to strike with a giant concussion in the molten encircling shell not far from our great shaft's opening, making all the molten shell about us quiver with that great shock. It was another warning, that the doom of the hidden world was at hand within minutes, perhaps. And that sight, that doom that menaced now themselves, seemed to act like a great spur of fear upon the massed spheres beneath, that held all the flesh-things. For now as there flashed to them some unseen order from the rulers' black sphere hanging to one side, scores, hundreds, of those spheres had formed swiftly into another mighty column and again were rushing with suicidal fury up toward the opening in which we hung!

Thus, as they came up within ray-range of us again with their few foremost spheres' rays flashing upward, our own rays had driven down again among them, and stabbing down through the long solid mass cut instant and mighty lanes of annihilation through them! Still, though, heedless of the death before them, the remaining spheres of that column rushed up, hoping to catch us with one of their wildly-whirling rays, but ever as they came within range of us our deadly beams were annihilating them, our sphere leaping from side to side in the shaft to avoid their own, and then with but a scant score left of the hundreds of spheres of that third column, those survivors were reeling downward also!

For a third time our sphere had driven back their attack, had sent their shattered column reeling back down from the shaft they sought to enter, and now as we hung there amid the thundering fires Kelsall and Fenton and Darrell and I were shouting like mad beings, were crying out in all the wild excitement of battle that filled us! Beneath us we could see the giant square masses of the thousands of spheres hanging there still, out of range beneath the molten sea that hung above them, and could see a restless and panicky movement passing through them as their third attack was thus all but annihilated. Far to the right and left beneath us extended their masses.

Now as we gazed downward tensely we saw masses of those spheres rushing away to right and left away from beneath our opening, a movement that for the moment puzzled us. For as we gazed down we saw that there was rising toward us no swift succeeding attack, though the creatures beneath knew as well as we that but minutes remained before the final cataclysm of the spinning world beneath! Moments thus we hung tensely there, the great molten floods roaring still with never-ceasing power about us, all our sphere having grown so hot that almost its walls and controls seared our hands. Then suddenly there shot from either side just beneath those molten fires, just out of their zone of intenser heat, a double mass of spheres, driving thus suddenly into view from right and left just beneath the opening in which we hung and at the same instant letting their yellow beams of death drive through the great glare toward us!

"The spheres!" cried Kelsall in that instant. "They've come toward us just beneath the molten roof—!"

As they shot toward us it seemed that a wild storm of brilliant beams were criss-crossing across that opening in which we hung, but in the split-second that those beams had stabbed toward us, the control-wheels had spun beneath my hands and our sphere had leaped upward in the shaft a little in the instant before the deadly rays could reach us!

Then in the following moment, as the masses of spheres drove farther into the opening beneath us, our own sphere's rays were stabbing like light down among them, leaping in brilliant destruction among them as they spun there in that mad moment! In a single flash, two-thirds of those spheres had winked into nothingness beneath our leaping rays, and in the next instant as the remaining spheres drove wildly into the opening and swerved from those rays they had ventured too close to the roaring molten walls of living fire about us and had seared and warped and burst and flamed in destruction. But straight up from beneath, and from either side still, spheres upon scores of spheres were whirling madly toward the opening of the shaft in which we hung!

Flash!—flash!—flash!—over the roaring from all about us there came the swift-succeeding detonations of our brilliant rays as they swept down in swift, dancing lanes of death through those masses of spheres that strove to break in upon us! Hanging as we were a little up inside the great shaft's opening, they could not loose their rays up upon us until they had burst up to that opening, from either side or beneath. And in the instant that they did so, as their masses of spheres appeared beneath us, their occupants blinded by the awful glare from about and above us, Darrell was sending out terrific beams lancing down in lightning-like stabs, sweeping through them in awful swathes of death, mowing them from existence as they appeared.

Clinging there to the sphere's controls in that mad moment, I sent it dancing from side to side in the great shaft, venturing almost to its death in its swift short rushes toward the flaming seas of death about us, leaping this way and that in the great shaft to escape the rays that the spheres rushing up from beneath loosed blindly up toward us! It seemed in that moment impossible, almost, that we four, that our single sphere, could thus hold back the countless thousands beneath. Yet our rays

stabbed downward still, sweeping the opening just beneath us clean of the gleaming spheres as they rushed into it, while scores of others of those rushing spheres were whirling in that wild moment to dreadful death in the thundering fires around us!

Trapped

UP—up—and then came wild cheers again from Darrell and the rest of us as the uprushing swarms of spheres, recoiled from this death which we were loosing upon them! They drew back, seemed to mass swiftly their foremost globes into another great column like those first ones that had been hurled up against us, and then that column was rushing up from their far-flung masses of waiting spheres, toward us once more! But as it did so there came another distant, dull tremendous grinding roar from far beneath and as we glanced down we saw even in that moment another great section of matter, another vast mass, breaking loose from the spinning and deserted hidden world far beneath! "Another warning—another warning of the hidden world's end!" I cried. "It's but minutes now till that end comes!"

"Hold steady!" Darrell shouted. "The flesh-things know it's the end for all of them if they don't get up in the shaft before their world bursts—they're coming up again!"

And at the very instant that the column had rushed up into ray-range of us one of its foremost spheres had veered to one side; and as our rays stabbed down and shattered the uprushing column, that single sphere had used that instant to rush blindly up into the glare of light and beat about us, rushing blindly up at immense speed and whirling up the shaft past us, on up into the great shaft above us!

In the next moment Darrell had sent a stab of yellow death up into the shaft after that uprushing sphere but before it could reach it that sphere had shot up and out of sight, rushing madly up the shaft above us!

"The hundred spheres at the shaft's top!" yelled Fenton suddenly. "It's gone up to get those hundred spheres—to bring them down upon us from above!"

Beneath us, the last of those attacking spheres had drawn down, down among all their far-flung waiting masses once more, hanging there with them for a moment as though waiting. Long minutes we waited, I knew, for the downrush of the hundred spheres above, to crush us, to annihilate us, between two simultaneous resistless rushes from above and beneath! There was a pause, a great pause of moments that seemed to our numbed senses hours, a pause broken by a sudden swift forming of hundreds of the countless spheres beneath into another column, a column that like the others was gathering there beneath us and then whirling up again toward us! And as it flashed up toward us there came a hoarse cry from Kelsall, gazing upward and as I glanced up I made out, high in the dimmer glow of the great shaft above us, little flashes of white light; little beams of white light that were growing each instant brighter, beams of light that came from a solid other column of spheres, of a hundred spheres, that was thundering down the shaft upon us from above!

Down from above, and upward from beneath, rushed those two columns, the one above the nearest, falling down upon us at nightmare speed. No

rays it flashed lest they stab down past us and destroy the column beneath, but it shot down upon us in a solid mass that meant to smash into instant annihilation by terrific impact! An instant more meant the end, I knew, and then as that solid, narrow column of spheres thundered down the great shaft's center down upon us, as the other column farther beneath rushed up, I had made a decision, had gripped the control-wheels in an iron grasp, and then after an instant's pause had sent our sphere rushing sidewise like light from the path of the down-thundering spheres above, had sent it whirling straight toward the molten, roaring flood of the great shaft's wall!

Then in an awful rending crash of metal upon metal those two columns of spheres, thundering up and down toward each other, had been changed instantly into a single great mass of wreckage that spun there in the great shaft's opening beneath us and that then was swirling into the great shaft's molten sides and vanishing in bursts of flame in them even as our own sphere leaped back to the shaft's center and away from those searing molten floods! Our swift leap sidewise had saved us from the downrushing hundred spheres from above. The next moment, as though spurred at last to mad, utterly heedless action by that spectacle, all the thousands of spheres that hung beneath us there were moving suddenly up toward us, up toward the shaft!

Up—up—in a giant mass of close-gathered spheres they were rising toward us, the black sphere of their rulers placing themselves now at their head! Purposefully, deliberately, more slowly, they were coming upward now, in their last great attack! And then as we awaited them, as my fingers gripped tensely the control-wheels, Darrell at the ray-control, Kelsall and Fenton at the window, there came suddenly from Darrell a hoarse, wild cry!

"The ray-control!" he cried. "It's useless—the sphere's ray-charges are exhausted!"

The sphere's ray-charges exhausted! Our only weapon gone, with the exhausting of those charges, which even as we had known needed to be recharged, replenished, at frequent intervals! It seemed to me that all things that we had gone through, all the things about us, the walls of molten fire that roared about us, the great masses of spheres that were rising deliberately toward us from beneath, the white faces of Kelsall and Darrell and Fenton that stared into my own, were whirling in an insane kaleidoscope about me in that moment. For with the exhausting of our rays, the passing of our only weapon, had come the end—the end for us and for the world of man above us!

Upward toward us, purposefully, grimly, those far-flung sphere-masses were coming, and now were almost within ray-range beneath us.

"But look! The world beneath—breaking up!"

Breaking up! For even at that moment as the masses of spheres had driven up grimly toward us, as their upmost spheres had come within ray-range of us, there had come from the hidden world spinning far beneath them a colossal thunderous roar of sound that drowned in its stupendous roll even the roar of the fires about us! And at the same moment we glimpsed the spinning, gleaming sphere of the hidden world there beneath, that had spun at earth's heart since earth's beginning, expanding,

swelling, and then breaking into colossal masses of matter, that were whirling outward in all directions toward the molten floods of the earth's encircling shell!

There beneath us those massed thousands of spheres, holding within them all the flesh-thing hordes, hovered in that moment, as though stunned, stupefied, by the titanic cataclysm of their bursting world, and then, the next instant, as I saw those titanic masses of matter rushing upward toward us as they were rushing outward toward all the encircling molten shell of earth, I gripped the control-wheels and had sent our sphere flashing like lightning up the great shaft! And even as we leaped up thus we had glimpsed in that flashing instant the colossal fragments of the burst hidden world striking the massed spheres there beneath, annihilating those spheres and crashing with their wreckage toward the molten encircling shell!

Upward like a darting ray of light our sphere shot in that instant, up through the shaft at colossal, drunken speed, as about us there came a stupendous reeling shock—that shock that marked the cataclysmic death of the world within it! Then as I clung there to the controls in that mad minute there was a long, grinding roar about us, and the shaft's walls seemed to march inward upon our upward-flashing sphere, as beneath that terrific shock from within all earth swayed and quaked!

But as the shaft's walls moved slowly, grindingly toward us, as we flashed crazily up through the awful roaring darkness in that moment between them, I held open the speed-control with the last of my strength, heard as though from an infinite distance about me the hoarse cries of Darrell and Kelsall and Fenton, over the grinding, closing roar about us. And then abruptly, just as the great earth-mass about the shaft buckled about us, closed completely in about us, we had shot up into the open air! Had shot up into the darkness of night, with above us the brilliant stars of heaven! And as I halted our uprushing sphere, as we swayed there, gazing downward, we saw that there in the long triangular clearing the great opening of the shaft, with a final dull great roar, was vanishing, closing, even as earth quivered still about it!

The way to that vast space inside earth where had spun the hidden world was closed! Closed forever by the last titanic cataclysm in which that hidden world and all its spheres and all its great flesh-creature hordes had gone together to death!

It was not until many minutes later that our sphere came at last hung to earth's surface. In those minutes we had hung there, gazing downward as though stunned, gazing downward toward that great sunken circle of earth which alone remained in the clearing to mark the place of the great shaft. Then as I sent the sphere downward, as it came to rest, its humming ceasing, the door was clanging open and we stepped forth, Kelsall and Darrell and Fenton and myself, stumbling out onto the surface of the long clearing to stand there, gazing slowly about us.

Far above us stretched the great curtain of the brilliant tropical stars, and in the white light that fell from them all about us seemed unchanged, with the great shaft gone and the hundred spheres that

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The Hidden World

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had guarded it gone also, to death far below. The long, triangular clearing, the two swift-flowing rivers on either side, the dark mass of the jungle stretching far away about us, our tent and boat there at the clearing's edge—all seemed the same as on that night, two days before, when we had waited there for the appearance of the fourth light-shaft, little dreaming what great horror lay behind the mystery we had come to solve.

Two days! It seemed incredible, as I stood there with Darrell and Fenton and Kelsall, that into that interval had been crowded all that we had seen and done. The appearance of the fourth light-column and the blasting upward of the great shaft; the uprush of spheres and flesh-creatures and their capture of Kelsall and Fenton; the hours of tortured waiting for Darrell and myself, and our mad venture down the shaft to the hidden world; our strange adventures in that stranger world and our rescue of our friends and flight up from it; our mad battle holding the shaft and that last great cataclysm that had annihilated the hidden world and all its creatures; these things seemed to me the events of years, rather than days or hours.

"Two days!" Darrell's low exclamation, beside

me, was echoing my own thoughts. "And what we've been through in them—!"

Fenton was nodding. "Two days—and in them we've penetrated to another world, and have seen that world go to death."

"It all was real?" I cried. "We did go down the shaft—did find you two there in the hidden world?"

"It was real," said Kelsall, slowly, thoughtfully.

"The horror that rose toward our world—the destiny that halted that horror at the last. Real—yes."

"And this sphere—real," Darrell said. "And the things that our world can learn from it, gain from it, when it knows at last from what it escaped—."

He was silent, and in that moment we all were silent, Darrell and Kelsall and Fenton and I standing there in the dim starlight at the clearing's center, with strange emotions clatching at our hearts. Standing there in a dark little group, with behind us the gleaming shape of the great sphere. Standing there, unspeaking and unmoving, as though unable yet to comprehend, to believe in, that miracle which had held back the doom that the creatures of the hidden world had prepared for the world of man, and which had loosed instead upon the hidden world itself and all its creatures a greater, swifter doom.