

Weird Tales



JULY, 1952

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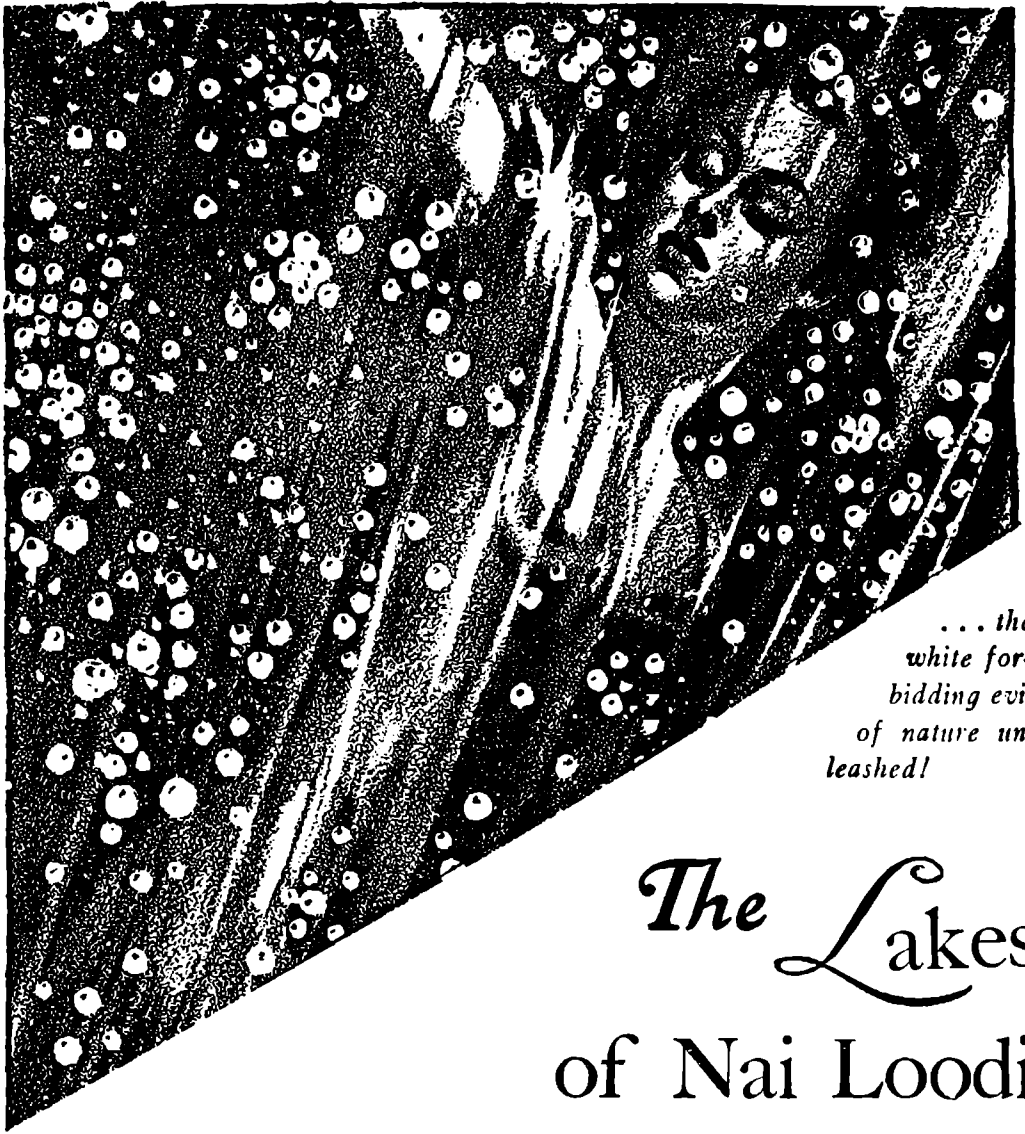
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D. McILWRAITH, Editor



... the
white for-
bidding evil
of nature un-
leashed!

The Lakes of Nai Loodi

BY DONALD F. VIEWEG

I NEVER felt so cold before in my entire life! The icy wind blasted about us, congealing my breath and whipping it back on my face. My fingers and toes throbbed and numbed and finally seemed to drop off. Long fragments of ice breaking off the peaks above us made walking hazardous. We hugged the base of mountain trails fearing for our very lives.

I wondered why in heaven's name I had allowed myself to be talked into going on such a fool's errand. John Denton, for all his genius, was insane to live up here!

As my guide and I traveled between

jagged glaciers of virgin ice which frowned down upon puny man's trespassing, I tried to review the events that brought me here. But everything was mixed up; everything pointed to Denton, a man with a brilliant, but unpredictable, unfathomable brain.

It had all started because of his letter. Those few words scrawled on a scrap of paper had expressed such complete terror no man could have ignored his plea for help. To me it seemed incredible that a person of Denton's caliber could have shown such fear—and after five long years of silence.

Denton worked at Allied Research for years and no one knew anything about him except that he was a good American and his father was an Arctic explorer who had burned to death in a lava pit.

He was quiet and moody. He grunted out scientific findings that aided greatly in the discovery of the first atomic bomb. Then one day he quit Allied. Phuff!— Just like that. Without a word he disappeared as though from the face of the earth.

Perhaps if Denton hadn't been so unpredictable, we at Allied could have known what was going on inside that brain of his. Perhaps we could have helped him. But with stepped up war production, everyone was too busy to question that faraway look in his eyes. Then that something enveloped him like a magnetic cloud and finally dragged him away. I recall that day: August 14, 1945, the end of World War II.

Five years later he sent that letter, which, for me, was the beginning of the cataclysm of events that followed. I was elected to bring him back; his magnificent brain with its files of atomic information was again needed.

AS I stumbled into the twenty-foot drifts between me and my destination, I recalled the trip. It had been a hectic, exhausting series of planes, boats, mule pack and finally dog sled until I finally arrived at the tiny shack village of Kai Loo. Once there I learned that Denton hadn't settled in Kai Loo as I thought, but far on its outskirts, a distance of some eighty miles due north. He had built a cabin a few hundred yards from a place called the Steaming Lakes.

I turned to my guide who was unpacking for a badly needed night's rest. "Igor," I said, "what are the Steaming Lakes?"

The man's reaction was astonishing. His small eyes widened until I thought they would pop. His mouth dropped as if unhinged. He threw back his grisly head. "Nai Loodi! Nai Loodi!" he cried. "Evil goddess!"

"Oh, come, come, man," I rebuked him. "What are you talking about?"

The guide furiously scooped at the frozen air and revolved one hand around the other. "Smoke, fire come from snow. Hot . . . evil place!"

But even that warning didn't deter me; I had a mission and I had to complete it. The next morning I had to agree to give Igor more money to accompany me. I made what preparations I required and we set off.

Eighty miles in an automobile is a mere two-hour trip, but in dog sled over the most desolate, mountainous terrain I had ever encountered, it turned out to be an agonizing, four-and-a-half day trek. It snowed practically every step of the way—not snow like in New England, but in sheets. It roared down in blinding mass, coating my face and new beard with ice.

And now here I was; nine thousand, two hundred and three miles from home and slowly freezing to death. There was no sign of life about me. Nature here was raw, untamed, king! I was continually afraid of running short of food and my stomach turned over at the thought of raw dog meat; but after the third day, I would have eaten the beasts alive if the need had arisen.

I again wondered why I had allowed myself to be talked into coming after Denton. Why had he ever come here to this frozen wilderness?

I NOTICED that Igor and the dogs didn't show the slightest sign of fatigue. Neither did they seem happy to see the thin column of yellow-gray smoke from the Steaming Lakes in the distance. But I was jubilant! When I started to run, Igor checked me. Distance was deceptive, he told me, especially over the long, snow-packed plateau we were traveling. The smoke ahead looked only a few miles away, but he assured me it was over ten.

Those last miles were heart-breaking drifts, but we finally arrived. I was totally unprepared for what I found. I had never seen such awesome, frozen beauty in my life! The Steaming Lakes region was a masterpiece in ice sculpture—a white, winter carnival of grotesque figures carved by wind and snow. The scene swirled before my eyes and I had to grasp Igor for support.

Right in the center of that frozen wonderland were the lakes I had heard about, the terrifying contradiction of nature, bubbling yellow and sulphurous froth from the bowels of the earth. They seemed to stretch for miles. The heat close up was terrific.

Bordering the lakes was a thick frame of porous blue-orange rock which blistered at the touch and hissed at the snow.

When I finally turned away, I saw, to the right, a cabin which must be Denton's. It was a brown smudge located at the base of a glacier which ended so abruptly I thought some giant had sliced off one end like a loaf of bread.

Igor pointed to it. "I no stay!" His words echoed back in a thousand, piping voices. "I go back now. Castle of Nai Loodi!"

Since it was again beginning to snow, I decided Igor was crazy to even think about returning to Kai Loo. I motioned him to join me, which rather to my surprise and relief, he did. Together we trudged toward the shelter.

IN THOSE five years Denton hadn't changed much. He had grown leaner which gave the impression of increased height and had sprouted a luxurious black beard any Civil War general would have been proud of. His eyes were still the same restless eyes I remembered. But that misty, faraway look had been replaced by a burning, almost knife-like eagerness.

Upon recognizing me, he smiled welcome. He wrung my hand and patted me on the back and forearm.

"Come in. Come in," he said. "You look frozen."

I went inside while Denton talked with my guide. A few minutes later he joined me.

"Igor is going back," he said as he bolted the door.

"Now?" I asked. "After our long trip?"

Denton nodded. "Igor told me he would have made better time, but you slowed him down. Igor never stays here."

From the abrupt way Denton spoke, I knew that that conversation was finished. When we had eaten, Denton sat opposite me across the wooden table.

"You came sooner than I expected," he said. "I'm sorry you went to all the trouble, but I don't need you."

I jumped to my feet. "You don't need me? What do you—"

"Don't get excited," Denton said softly. "I'm sorry, but I shouldn't have written to you. At the time it seemed the thing to do, but now I realize it was foolish. I've got

to solve my own problems . . . and in my own way."

"Problems?" I said. "Up here? What problems can you possibly solve in this place?"

Denton clasped his hands upon the table and stared at them for a moment. He glanced at me. "Have you ever heard of Nai Loodi?"

"Nai Loodi?" I said. "That's the name that frightened Igor. That's why he returned."

"Igor is superstitious and that's the cause of Fear," Denton remarked, his face hardening. "I'm not! I believe—you—you noticed the steaming lakes?"

I nodded.

"Beautiful, aren't they?" Denton's voice was almost reverent.

"Yes, but—but aren't they dangerous?"

Denton shrugged. "Perhaps. You can't tell what will happen when you're careless. Sometimes the heat from the lakes makes walking treacherous. You've seen what it's doing to the glacier behind the cabin. Melting her."

So that was the reason for the peculiar shape of that glacier, I thought. I remembered how it looked like a huge loaf of bread, its sides almost perpendicular to the ground. The entire surface was slick and highly reflective.

"Aren't you afraid living so close to that thing?" I asked. "What about an avalanche?"

Denton laughed dryly. "Hardly. She runs parallel to my cabin, not toward it. And she moves at a snail's pace. As soon as she inches ahead, the heat from the lakes melts her down a little more."

"She? You call a glacier 'she'?"

"Yes, why not?"

"A mountain of ice?"

"Not a mountain of ice, but Nai Loodi's!" He actually insisted.

"Nai Loodi's" I said. "Do you mean to say Igor's fear was of a glacier? Why, we traveled over fiercer ones just coming up here!"

But Denton didn't hear me. He had closed his eyes. He was cocking his head as though listening for something. Outside the wind was howling up an all-night gale. The snow, which had only begun as I ar-

rived, was now a driving sheet of gray against the two low windows.

"Going to be a bad one," Denton said softly. "Tonight she'll raise the Devil." He opened his eyes. "No, Igor fears no glaciers but one—this one behind my cabin, the castle of Nai Loodi."

Nai Loodi. That name again—a name that struck terror into the guide, yet Denton said it almost as a prayer.

"Who is Nai Loodi?" I asked.

DENTON'S slow reply was almost inaudible. He was talking more to the wind and the storm than to me. "She's a goddess, a beautiful, bewitching goddess. I saw her only once, but once was enough. I'll never forget her. I know she's a fiend! But I'll never forget her." Denton sighed as though under a great weight.

"Let me tell you about it, Howard. Perhaps you'll understand. After your long trip, I think you're entitled to some explanation. I didn't come here by accident. No. I've been here before. In fact, I was born in Kai Loo. You see, my parents were explorers, but my mother died when I was very young. I loved the trips we used to make, Howard. You'll never realize the thrill of such a dangerous life. We—

"One day I hurt my ankle and was laid up at Kai Loo. After a week of waiting, my father became restless. He couldn't stand doing nothing. He decided to investigate the steaming lakes, a new region the earth had vomited up a few months before. I asked him to wait, but he wouldn't listen. He set off alone, with just two dogs and a light sled.

"Two weeks later he was found crawling in circles thirty miles outside of Kai Loo. It was Igor who carried him to my cabin. When we removed his clothing and saw his body, we knew there was nothing we could do. He was blind! His hair was snow white. He was almost crazed with fever, and in his delirium he raved about a woman with red hair walking on fire. He died that night."

Denton looked up. "Do you know what killed him?" he cried. "Do you think he froze to death? Do you?"

Denton frightened me. His eyes burned into mine until I had to turn away. He

seized me by the shoulder and twisted me about.

"My father died of multiple, third-degree burns! He was a walking dead mass of burnt flesh!"

I shook my head. I couldn't believe it. Was this the magnificent brain I came to bring back to civilization? I tried to comfort him but it didn't work. I waited. I waited until his breathing returned to normal. I watched him stroke his temples with the side of his thumbs, a habit I had noticed back at Allied. It seemed to relax him. He blinked and his eyes seemed to focus.

"I buried my father in the ice he loved," he continued hoarsely. "Igor said he must have fallen into the steaming lakes. You never knew my father, Howard, but he was incapable of such carelessness. He knew and recognized danger. He had the greatest respect for it. He couldn't have fallen into the steaming lakes!

"I was convinced of that, but I wanted proof. As soon as I could walk, I packed my gear. Igor at first refused to accompany me, but out of respect to my father, he gave in.

"If I hadn't been so thoroughly hateful of that place, Howard, I would have found it beautiful—as you perhaps did. But all I could see was evil, the white, forbidden evil of nature unleashed. The filthy yellow smoke from the open pits beckoned like crawling fingers of Hell.

"Igor was petrified. Ghosts and demons inhabited the boiling pits. The queen of sin and evil, Nai Loodi, lived within that curiously shaped glacier. I scoffed at his superstitions: the myth of a virgin goddess of passion was something out of the books of the Northlands, a carry-over from the Viking age of Eric the Red.

UNDER a film of powder snow we found my father's trail. It was broken by snows upon snows, but we were able to follow it. My father had gone close to the lakes, Howard, but we picked up a second trail returning. The steps were spaced far apart, as though my father had been running. A few feet from the base of the bread loaf glacier of Nai Loodi his footprints stopped. From all appearances he had vanished into a wall of ice.

"Igor and I searched for other footprints and finally located them fifty feet away, only this time the trail was bloody. Long streaks of charred fur and flesh stained the ice. The snow was caked red. Do you realize what that meant? My father had fallen into a pit of boiling lava which didn't exist! There was nothing there but a hundred-foot wall of ice!"

After a pause in which Denton fought to restrain himself, he continued. "I felt sick, Howard, sick and hopeless. There was nothing I could do. Nothing. I was completely beaten in spirit. I told Igor to pack.

"While he made ready, I stared at the base of that glacier that had swallowed up my father then spat him up, black and half dead. I was grief-stricken, Howard, but I was rational. What happened then wasn't my imagination. What I'm going to tell you now I actually saw and heard.

"I was looking at those bloody tracks when a breeze swirled some powder snow into my eyes, momentarily blinding me. As I wiped my face I thought I heard something like the tinkle of tiny silver bells. It made my scalp prickle. I looked up. There was nothing. Then I heard it again, this time behind me. It sounded like laughter.

"I spun around and saw the most beautiful creature I had ever seen. She was tall and slim. Her mature, semi-nude body was a masterpiece carved in blue-white marble. Her features were incredibly young, haloed by flaming hair which swirled about her arms and shoulders as though buoyant. Her eyes were red as flame and her brows were arched lines, like wings. She was smiling at me in a way that—that seemed indecent yet I couldn't turn away.

"When she held out her arms to invite me to her breast, I couldn't resist. Everything had gone crazy. The yellow smoke from the sulphur pits began to envelop her like a filthy hand and I started to run. I had to save her. She drifted further back toward the lakes and I ran faster, my name, 'Denton! Denton!' screaming in my ears.

"I remember shouting, 'Wait! Wait!', then something hit me. A tremendous weight smothered me into the snow and everything went black. When I regained my senses, Igor was shaking me. He had saved my life, because if I had run two

feet more I would have been broiled alive.

"I stood up and searched the lakes and for an instant I again saw the red hair and the blue-white body of Nai Loodi. My ears echoed to her laughter . . . and she was gone.

"Do you understand now why I came back?" Denton asked, his voice trembling. "Do you? I've got to find out if she was real or just a vision caused by Igor's tales. I've got to! She's haunted me long enough!" Denton buried his head in his hands and was still.

FRANKLY, I didn't know what to think after that. Denton's tale—if it was a tale—left me trembling. It was fantastic, and yet—I didn't know what to think. I was almost afraid to glance at the dark corners of the cabin for fear of finding— Oh, perhaps you gentlemen think it was silly of me, but there, in that weird land, I was ready to believe anything. I fumbled for a match and lit my pipe. I had to think and I couldn't. The wind outside was moaning like shackled fiends and every so often the very earth beneath seemed to shake.

Suddenly I heard a crash like a million claps of thunder! The cabin reeled before my eyes. Books flew down from their shelves, dishes rattled and splintered on the floor, and chairs slid across the room as though alive. I clutched at the edge of the table in panic.

"Denton!"

Denton looked at me, half amused. "It's Nai Loodi," he said above the rumbling. He smiled and stood up. "According to Igor, she's awakening!"

More dishes smashed then the rumbling subsided. The thunder softened and finally ceased and the wind again howled. I eased into my chair.

"W-What was it, John?" I asked. "Earthquake?"

He scowled. "No. Perhaps I should have warned you. It's the glacier moving ahead to be melted down another foot." He waved his hand with an air of finality. "Don't worry, you're safe."

SAFE, the man said. I almost laughed with hysteria. How could he remain so calm with that—that *thing* outside his door?

Was he human? Had the long months of loneliness deranged him? Nothing seemed right up here. Then I had another thought: Perhaps I was being too severe in my judgment. It seemed that ever since I left the security of friends and familiar surroundings I was in a continuous state of fright. Here I had no mental references. Everything was strange and different, horribly distorted. And Denton's story of a goddess with red eyes and blue skin hadn't helped things any.

"What do you hope to prove up here?" I asked finally.

"Prove?" Denton said. He laughed ironically. "That's the odd part; I—I really don't know. I came back because I felt I had to. All during the war when I was working for Allied I felt like something was trying to get into me to drag me away. I fought it, but when the war ended, I had no more resistance. I left the way I did because there would have been too much explanation."

"But you haven't been here for five years?" I said incredulously.

"No," he replied. "I traveled. I visited every place I could, but it didn't help. I began dreaming of Nai Loodi, the way I saw her when I was a boy. She called to me; finally I answered."

"After two months of this place, I began to think I was insane for coming here. That's when I wrote to you. But I don't need you now because I know I'm not insane. You heard the glacier. You felt the earth shudder. Nai Loodi is coming, you hear me! She's coming!"

I couldn't believe those bizarre words came from the Denton I knew and admired. I tried to persuade him to listen to reason, but he shook his head.

"No," he snapped. "I've got to see her once more. But I'll make you a deal. If she's merely fancy as you say, I'll return. Okay?"

That was fine with me. I knew I practically had him back at Allied.

"But John—?"

"Huh?"

"W—What if she's real?" The words came out automatically; I didn't even realize the thought!

Denton sighed in resignation. "If she's real, there's not much I can do. I couldn't

refuse her before. How can I expect to now, unless—" He shuddered as though chilled.

"Unless what?"

"N—Nothing. I don't know if—" He stood up and shook himself. "This is getting morbid. Come on, I'll fix you some coffee before turning in."

THE first thing to greet me the next morning was the odor of fresh coffee and fried bacon. Denton looked like he had been awake for hours. His eyes were clear—hardly what I expected from last night.

He caught me watching him. "Hello! You're finally awake. I was afraid you wouldn't sleep at all with all that noise last night. The glacier was making a devilish sound."

Noise? I hadn't heard a thing all night. "I was tired," I told him as I looked about. Two oil lamps were still burning. "Isn't it day, yet?" I asked.

Denton nodded. "Twelve noon, or thereabouts." He followed my glance to the oil lamps. "Oh, them— It snowed last night, remember? The windows are blocked. After breakfast we'll have to tunnel out."

When I climbed out of my bunk I realized that the interior of the cabin was freezing. I dressed, chattering. "You-you look mighty chipper this morning," I said.

He nodded his head and smiled as though enjoying a secret joke. "I feel good today. Things seem different! Talking must have helped. Besides, I had a dream. I dreamed everything would be all right."

I was delighted by this remarkable change in his attitude. "Then you'll come back with me?" I said hopefully.

"I might consider it. Now sit down and eat."

We ate in silence. When we had finished and had cleared the table, Denton sat opposite me.

"I'm glad you came, Howard," he said. "You brought a touch of civilization or something I seemed to have forgotten. It's done me good."

Denton got up and walked to the opposite side of the cabin. He picked up his furs and snowshoes and sat on the bunk. "Let's dig our way out of this deep freeze," he said.

I followed his example and struggled

into my sealskin boots, furs and wind-breaker.

"Bundle up," Denton called over his shoulder. He removed the wooden bar locking the door. "It's going to be crystal cold out there. Bring your goggles, snow shoes too."

I gathered my equipment and joined him at the door which had jammed. Together we jerked it open and gazed into a solid wall of snow.

WITH a small bladed shovel, Denton hacked at it. "It's still soft," he said. "We'll be out in a minute." He chopped and scooped until he had dug a two-foot tunnel which rose obliquely toward light. As he broke through, part of the tunnel caved in and engulfed him. He struggled to his feet and brushed himself off.

"Pass up my shoes," he said. He fastened them on and crawled out the hole, then I followed. Denton reached down and pulled me into the light.

Spread before me was a binding white world which I saw only an instant before everything went black. My eyes stabbed with pain.

"You can get snow blinded with cricks like that," Denton warned. "Put on your goggles!"

As my eyes grew accustomed to this stark, white, misty world spread before me, Denton called my attention to the cabin. It was covered by a drift fifteen feet high on its south side while its other three sides were practically bare of snow.

"That's the wind for you," Denton remarked. "Usually the drifts form on the north side."

I looked about in infant wonder. The steaming lakes seemed less ominous with the swirling mist spread over them and their clean blanket of snow; but as we walked closer I saw the rocks and lava stained in brilliant hues of red, blue, gray, yellow and orange. Slashes of vermilion, topaz and garnet formed the giant palette of an insane artist's nightmare. In the center of the lakes were streams of blue-green flame spurting into the air only to fall back in momentary defeat.

Denton nudged me. "We're lucky the storm did come from the north," he said.

toward Nai Loodi's glacier which was vaguely outlined in the lifting fog. "Look at her! Look!"

For fully a minute I stared in fascination. What tremendous force could have done it? What power on earth could have split a mountain of crystal ice down its center like an orange?

The bread loaf glacier of Nai Loodi was now two half loaves, separated by at least fifty feet of space.

Denton ran toward it. Within a few seconds he had vanished into the mists. I snapped the remaining strap to my snowshoe and ran after him, sinking deep into the snow with each exaggerated step.

When I finally overtook him, it was only because he had stopped. Three feet before him, where yesterday a solid glacier had stood, was a bottomless pit fifty yards wide.

"It's amazing!" Denton whispered in admiration. "Last night she split open and look what she was resting on—absolutely nothing!"

Denton was right; it *was* amazing. What's more, it was uncanny, unnatural. I didn't know why, but I was trembling. The pale blue fog steadily rising from the chasm rolled like waves toward us. It crawled like slime over the edge of the pit and coiled about our feet, protesting in angry little puffs when we moved.

I seized Denton by the arm and jerked him back. "Don't get so close!" I warned.

Denton pulled away. His eyes were wide with excitement. "Don't stop me now, Howard. I know what I'm doing."

"Please, John, get back!" I begged. "You don't know how deep that thing is."

"Don't you worry, I won't fall," came the confident reply. "I'm an explorer, Howard, and this calls for exploration."

"You're not going to climb down there, John! Don't be foolish! One false step and—"

He laughed at my caution. "Ha! Me slip? Why, I was born on ice."

"The glacier blocked off most of the snow. We don't need our shoes after all."

I was thankful for that. For me, snowshoes were bulky, cumbersome things that made me waddle like a duck. As I was about to unfasten the strap to my second shoe, Denton jerked me to my feet.

"Howard, look!" he shouted. He pointed

I WAS still protesting when Denton began his insane descent into the pit. On my hands and knees I watched him as the blue haze swallowed him up, and he was gone. As if from far below I heard him grunt and groan. Suddenly the earth trembled!

I leaped back! The glacier of Nai Loodi swayed crazily.

Denton's scream pierced the rumbling, and a second later I heard the thud of his body as it hit.

"Denton! Denton!" I screamed. "Denton!" My cries echoed back, mocking me. With the awful silence, I realized that I was alone—alone in a horrible, frozen graveyard with eighty treacherous miles between me and life.

"Denton! DENTON!" I yelled in mounting panic.

His voice came to me out of the mists. "Well, I'll be damned. I'll be double damned!"

Thank heaven he was still alive! I called into the murky cloud separating us. "Are you all right?"

"This is amazing!" Denton said in awe. He seemed only a few feet below me, yet I couldn't see him.

"Where are you, John?"

"Hell's bells, Howard. Stop that silly yelling. Of course I'm all right."

"What—What happened?" I asked timidly.

"I lost my footing, that's all."

I wondered how he could sound so calm when he had narrowly missed falling to his death. I leaned over the edge of the pit. "How far down are you?"

He answered as though surprised. "Can't you see me? I'm only fifteen feet below. Come down and look at this."

I shuddered and stepped back from the edge. That bump on the head must have made him delirious if he thought I was going to climb down into that—that place. Why, I couldn't even see a foot ahead of me.

"I—I better wait up here," I told him.

"Dammit, Howard. Don't be an ass!" Denton yelled. "Nothing down here will harm you."

I crawled closer to the edge, but something warned me to stay where I was. Confused pictures kept flashing through my brain.

"But—But if I go down, how will we get out?" I asked.

A violent flood of curses greeted me from below. Then silence. I could hear a muffled scraping sound and my own breathing.

"Howard!" Denton called as though making an intense effort to keep his voice steady. "Howard, did—did you ever—walk on air?"

That bump on the head had hurt him. "Please come up," I begged. "You're seeing things."

Denton's immediate reply was a low and bitter laugh. "You're wrong, Howard," he said finally. "That's the rub; I'm *not* seeing things. I tell you the floor down here is invisible! There's nothing under me!"

Now I knew I'd have to go after him. Invisible floors? I stretched out on my stomach and swung my feet over the edge. I found a foothold and eased down into the thinning mists. The whole thing was like moving in a nightmare where one false step meant violent death.

"Easy," Denton instructed from below. "Over to the left."

I INCHED over and the next thing I knew I was tumbling through space. I didn't even have time to scream when I hit bottom and everything went black. When I came to, I heard Denton laughing over me.

"What the devil's so funny?" I said.

"Oh, you're not hurt. Give me your hand." He pulled me to my feet and brushed me off. I was beginning to see clearer through the haze.

"Look up and see how far you fell," Denton said.

I did, and I couldn't believe my eyes: I could see the top as clear as day!

"Now look below you," Denton said. "Better take a deep breath first."

I should have heeded his warning, because when I looked down I was sick. I needed to vomit. I clutched out for support.

Denton steadied me. "Take it easy," he said, laughing. "That's the way it affected me at first. You'll get used to it."

I hung on for my life. Get used to it, he said! Was it possible for a human being to get accustomed to walking on nothing—absolutely nothing?

"Look, it's solid enough," Denton assured me. He stamped his foot. "Go ahead, try it yourself."

Still holding his arm, I pounded my foot. The floor—or whatever it was—was as

solid as steel. Courage seeped back and I started to jump up and down, experiencing the most peculiar sensation I had ever known. I felt like a kid with a new toy. I was enjoying the sensation when a huge chunk of ice crashed down and missed us by inches. I looked up in horror to see long slabs of ice peeling in great waves from the walls of the pit. Denton jerked me off my feet.

"Stop it, Howard! Stop it!" he cried. "You'll bury us. Vibrations! The whole wall is crumbling!"

We clung together, ready to spring out of the path of falling ice, but the cliff stopped its trembling. We both sighed in relief.

"We're treading on unknown ground," Denton said, his face as white as mine must have been. "Walk softly."

It seemed incredible that the slight vibration of my step had almost toppled an entire glacier down upon us. Needless to say, I barely lifted my feet after that.

I watched curiously as Denton dropped to his knees and crawled around. He pulled off his thick gloves and rubbed his bare fingers over the invisible surface. He tasted them and made a wry face.

"Have you ever seen invisible plate glass?" he asked, pre-occupied.

Glass? Certainly Denton didn't think—

"No, it's not glass," Denton said, as though reading my thoughts. He rose to his feet and pulled on his gloves. "It's ice— invisible ice. The wind and snow of last night's storm polished and lapped it almost perfectly smooth . . . But—but it's ice, all right. Go ahead, feel it."

I touched the invisible floor with my naked fingers and felt a film of water form beneath them. I tasted my fingers. It *was* ice!

"It's smooth and slightly convex so it absorbs all light," Denton exclaimed. "That's why we can't see it." He sniffed at the air. "Steam seems to be lifting." He walked toward the almost perpendicular wall. "It's getting warmer. Come on, Howard, let's climb out of here before the heat from the lakes melts this stuff and we find ourselves swimming."

That was easy for him to say, but how? Now that the fog had almost cleared I saw a vertical wall of ice completely surround-

ing us. Exit seemed impossible. Already the walls were slick and moist from the mounting heat of the Steaming Lakes.

SUDDENLY I stopped! It was barely audible at first, just within the range of hearing. A few seconds later I heard it clear and ringing: feminine laughter! It was musical like—the tinkling of silver bells! Denton's very words!

I looked up. At the edge of the pit twelve feet above Denton's bobbing head stood a half clothed woman with her arms stretched to the sky and her head flung back. Her body was curved and graceful, a figure of incredible symmetry and beauty. Flaming coils of red hair swirled about her head and shoulders to the lilting rhythm of the winds above.

She was looking down at me and her eyes were tender and overflowing with love. She smiled and I shuddered in anticipation. I knew now why Denton had come back. I understood why he had been haunted all those years. I knew, I yearned, I desired. Nai Loodi of the Lakes! Nai Loodi, Daughter of Pleasures.

But Denton didn't know. He was making so much noise hacking footholds in the ice with his knife, he couldn't see her. I called to him.

He started. When he turned and saw me, he spun around and looked up. His reaction was amazing! Instead of being happy, he seemed repelled. He seemed to strain every fibre of his being to tear his attention away. He flung himself forward on the ice.

"Close your eyes!" he screamed.

Even if I had wanted to, I couldn't move a muscle. I felt clamped in the jaws of awe. My brain whirled. I was soaring in ecstasy among the stars. "Close your eyes," I heard again, but as though from a great distance. "Don't look at her!"

Denton's second warning had a miraculous effect. It was as if a veil had been lifted from my reason, a door had opened, a page had been turned—whatever the allusion—I awoke as though from a dream. I could again move! I could again think!

Then I knew why. Nai Loodi was no longer concerned with me; her attention was on Denton. She seemed to be command-

ing him to look at her. When he didn't obey, her eyes flared red. Her crimson lips pulled away from her teeth in a hideous snarl.

I understood it all now: the glacier, the pit, the ice—it was a trap, a glorified trap! I ran to Denton's side as he struggled to his feet, still shielding his face with his arm.

"Don't look at her eyes," he shouted.

I sneaked a glance, but Nai Loodi wasn't there above us. When I looked around I saw her in the pit with us. I didn't know how she got there—everything was confused—but she was with us in the pit. She made no attempt to come closer, but stood a good twenty feet away smiling. She was a fiend!

"We got to get out!" Denton cried. "Look for a place!"

We searched for an opening, but the entire wall was now smooth as glass. The top seemed miles over our heads.

Denton cupped his hands together. "Climb up on my shoulders! Hurry man. Hurry!"

He lifted me and my fingers were only inches from the top when everything started swaying. In the instant before I fell, I saw Nai Loodi stamping the ice floor which was now visible and rapidly taking on a bluish hue. The entire surface was rolling crazily, like a million plucked harp strings. Huge cracks slit across in lightning flash patterns.

"She's destroying it with vibrations!" I yelled.

DENTON again lifted me, but dropped me a second time as he lost his balance on the swelling ice. Then a new danger arose; the rhythmic vibrations began loosening the ice wall above us. Great chunks of ice dropped off. It thundered down into the pit. More and more followed like waves.

"That's the way out!" Denton said above the roar. "When part of the wall falls. It will be rough going, but—but we can make it!" He looked around. He pointed to the left.

"There it is! Get out, Howard. Get out!" He shoved me savagely.

I ran to the shattered wall and climbed like mad. Half way up I realized that Denton wasn't behind me. I turned and saw him running toward Nai Loodi, skidding

and slipping on the rolling, buckling surface. All around him, from between huge cracks, licked tongues of blue flame.

"Denton! Come back!" I called in blind panic.

"Get out. You fool, get out!"

I was almost to the top when a tremendous roar shook the air. I turned and saw the entire right side of the pit collapsing into a pool of blue-white flame.

But still Denton slipped toward Nai Loodi. She saw him and stopped her rhythmic vibration. She held out her arms to welcome him, and in that brief moment I reached the top. I was safe. But Denton . . .

I watched, horrified at the scene below. Three quarters of the blue ice floor melted into the pool of blue, stinking sulphurous flame. If Denton didn't get out now, he never would.

I screamed his name. He turned, and when he saw me out of the pit, he shot toward the one remaining wall. I looked at Nai Loodi. I had never seen such hate in a person's eyes. She snarled like an animal and her arched brows almost joined together. Instead of pursuing Denton, she waited until he was almost to the wall below me, then she stamped her little foot and the floor beneath him collapsed into flame.

"Father in heaven!"

I ran to the edge and screamed Denton's name. But he was gone . . . Denton . . . He had given his life to save mine. I watched as the blue flames licked higher and higher, finally obscuring Nai Loodi's triumphant smile I watched until my eyes blurred. My body felt like a great weight I couldn't seem to carry. I couldn't even move back from the edge when I heard the rumblings of the glacier as it crept forward to cover three-quarters of the gorge, and the earth trembled in protest. Denton . . . Denton was gone. . . .

IT SEEMED hours that I stared into the inferno. I heard my name echoing again and again in mocking reverberation.

A great man had given his life—and for me.

Then I did hear my name! It was cried soft and feeble, but it was in Denton's voice! I crawled closer. Between leaping

fingers of flame I saw him below me clinging to the jagged side of the pit. He hadn't fallen!

The heat was unbearable. I stretched on my stomach and held out my burned hands. Denton clutched them and, as I dragged him up, his eyes stared wide and thankful. I carried him some feet away from the blistering hell and fell exhausted to the cool snow.

I don't know how long it was before I opened my eyes. I turned to Denton and examined him quickly. He was badly burned. His face and clothes were black with caked blood. After some trouble, I managed to lift him to my shoulders. I carried him toward his cabin as the glacier of Nai Loodi slid forward and completely sealed the fiery pit.

It was many hours before he began to show signs of regaining consciousness, and I knew if I didn't get him back to civilization the world would mourn for a great man. When he moaned, I stopped packing and rushed to his bunk.

He called out for me in a voice that seemed lost and helpless.

"I'm here, John," I told him. "You're safe with me."

He tried to sit up. "Lie still," I said. "Don't disturb the bandages."

He sighed and asked for water.

I held a cup to his lips. "Drink it slowly," I said. "A little at a time."

When he again lay back, he smiled. His burnt lips split more and he winced in pain. "I—I beat her, Howard," he said.

I stroked his brow. "Yes, I know."

"I beat her. Yes, I beat her!"

I tried to quiet him. "Sleep, John. Get your strength."

"But I beat her!" He clutched my hand and I cried in pain. "She's no goddess, Howard. She's— She's—" He again lost consciousness and slept.

I didn't dare risk staying there without the proper medicants for both of us. When Denton was a little stronger, I made the perilous trip back. You gentlemen know the rest of the story. . . .

DR. HOWARD THORNDYKE looked about the large room. His eyes rested on each face. The Board of Directors of

Allied Research stared back. Most of the men were perspiring; all of them were breathing heavily. Finally Dr. Thorndyke faced the fat, balding man sitting at the head of the long, mahogany table.

"Well, Mr. Bateman—you asked for Denton's story. Now you have it. You greeted our plane. You went to the hospital."

The head of the Board of Directors wiped his brow. He slowly drummed the polished surface of the table with his fingers. The slight noise echoed through the room. He shook his head from side to side.

"Howard—it's fantastic! You really can't expect me to—"

"Fantastic, be damned!" shouted Dr. Thorndyke. "That's Denton's story! That's what took him away and that's why he's like he is now—half dead. I know—I know it's incredible, but it's the truth! I saw Nai Loodi! I heard her rotten laughter!"

Mr. Bateman held his hands before him as if to ward off the verbal attack. "I'm very sorry, Howard. Truly I am, but—"

He was interrupted by the jangling telephone before him. He picked it up, spoke into it and turned to Dr. Thorndyke.

"It's for you. It's from the hospital."

Dr. Thorndyke took the 'phone in his bandaged hands. He spoke softly into it for a minute, then his voice raised in pitch. "What?" he shouted. He listened some more, all the while his eyes widening until they were almost round. Perspiration poured down his red face. Finally he dropped the phone into its cradle and fell into a chair. He looked at Bateman.

"That was Vancroft," he said in a whisper. "It's happened . . ." After a pause, he continued. His voice was choked.

"Vancroft was with him. He said Denton awoke from a fitful sleep and sat up. He held out his arms in the dark and called some foreign name. Vancroft couldn't understand it. He said that as he tried to quiet Denton, he thought he saw a red-headed woman enter the room. She glided right past without seeing him and stopped at Denton's bed. She leaned over and kissed Denton on the lips. He smiled, Vancroft said, and fell back to the pillow—dead."
