

# STARTLING STORIES

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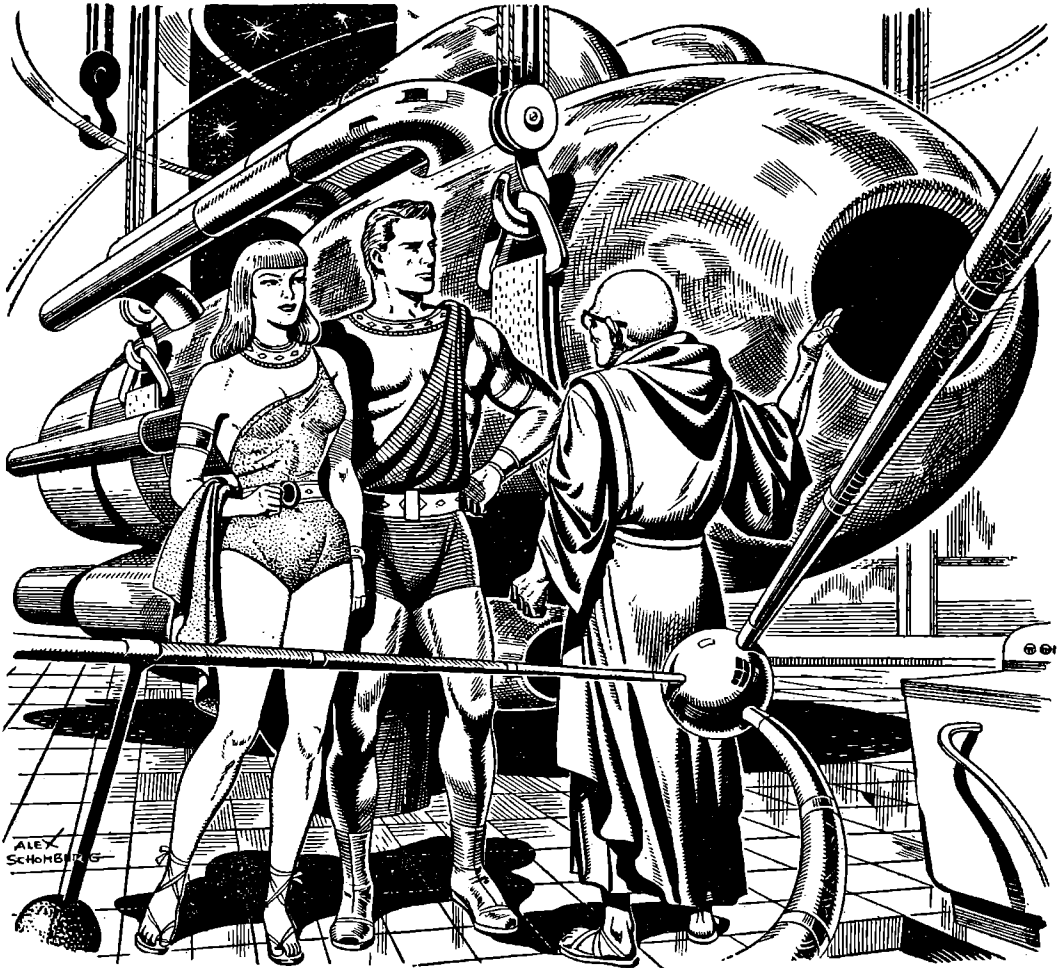
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SAM MERWIN, JR., Editor

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"Yes," said the scientist, "it came close to being the perfect machine"

# The Ultimate Engine

By CARTER SPRAGUE

**T**HEY stood, the three of them, in a bare white office in a building that was the last habitable place on Earth. Two of them, one man and the woman, were tall and lean and handsome and golden fair. Save for the difference of sex, which both wore with

pride, they might almost have been interchangeable with their clothing.

The other man was swarthier, less handsome, not so tall. Beneath the brief white robe that was his only garment his body was stooped and thin. His features were not so well defined and his

**You Can't Treat Science Like an Upstairs Maid!**

limbs protruded from the core of his trunk like knobby twigs.

Yet his brow was broad and high and lumped with thought. Beneath it his eyes were luminous with something deeper than thought—aglow with a luminosity which found no response in the cool assured serenity of the other two.

"We have come to you." It was the tall man who spoke first. His voice wore the timbre of assurance, the perfect diction not of intellectual awareness of language but of costly governesses and tutors. If there was the faintest trace of condescension as well, ingrained courtesy concealed it.

"Explanation will be easier here on the laboratory level," said the less-beautiful male. "Therefore I summoned you."

The woman spoke and her voice was liquid silver, low, exciting as a true aphrodisiac even in casual converse. "Then your people have found the Way?" she asked.

"We have found *a* way," said the older man, whose name was Zindorff. He was chief of science of the building, which was the city, which was the last habitable place on Earth.

"And you have not reported it sooner?" The man of beauty, whose name was Marcou, would have been expressing exasperation, even anger, had he been capable of displaying either.

"After so many centuries of failure," said Zindorff humbly, "we thought it wiser not to raise hope until success was assured."

"But this is splendid." The woman, whose name was Orella and who, with Marcou, was co-ruler of the last and finest remnant of the human species, lit up as women of an earlier Earth became luminescent when diamonds were laid in their laps.

"And none too soon," said Marcou the magnificent, acid still etched faintly upon the tip of his tongue. "As it is we shall have little enough time to prepare. The atmosphere machines cannot last much longer."

ZINDORFF said drily, "I know. My colleagues and I have been perhaps more aware of the urgency than anyone else." The dryness with which he spoke canceled any hint of rebuke.

"I want to see the ship," said Orella with what might have been eagerness in a woman less perfectly poised. "How long will the journey take?"

"It varies with the capacity of the traveler," Zindorff told them quietly. "That is what I wish to explain to you. You see, there is no ship."

"No ship?" said Marcou, frowning. "But if we are to reach even the nearest Centaurean planets . . ." His voice faded to uncomprehending silence.

"No ship," the scientist affirmed. "It has been impossible to build a star-ship on Earth, the while maintaining the city even at minimum survival efficiency for more than two hundred years. Our planet simply lacks the resources. Not even to Mars or Venus—"

"Who wishes escape to a dead planet?" asked Orella. "On either we would lack even the few comforts we still have here."

"Yet you have found the Way?" Marcou inquired.

"We have found *a* way," Zindorff repeated.

"Then I would see your machines," said Marcou. He spoke almost gently but the command was there.

These humans, the few thousands that remained of what had, scant centuries before been billions, lived in a society rigidly anarchistic. As the planet, increasingly stripped of its resources by unthinking human wastefulness and greed, had been less and less able to support its population human aims and institutions had altered beyond previous belief.

There had been, of course, a period of appalling wars, of genocide, of further destruction that had finally alarmed that little core of men and women who had, directly or otherwise, been the actual rulers of Earth since prehistoric times. They had at last been

forced to united action through fear of non-survival.

They had weighed the resources remaining on or in their dying planet, had created the city high in the Andes, with the icy waters of Lake Titicaca close to its base. They had carefully fostered sterility among the battered human masses, the while they selected carefully those admissable to their sheltered ranks.

They bred themselves as men had once bred cattle—ruler to ruler, artist to artist, athlete to athlete, engineer to engineer, scientist to scientist. And their aim had been escape to the stars or rather the planets of the stars. They were like a colony of mammal ants—each born to his function, each living for it.

They had built mighty ships, powered by the less stable elements, had sent them to Mars, to Mercury, even to the Asteroids and the Moons of Saturn and Jupiter. But thus far they had found no other home suitable for humanity even on such a reduced scale—and they had failed miserably to penetrate space beyond Uranus.

In recent years hope had waned, been forgotten. No longer had they the resources to send ships even as far as the Moon. For as their experience increased and their knowledge grew with it the planet around them continued to die.

They had luxury beyond any known to Lucullus or Condé Nast—but they lived in a prison. They had art and verse and music and philosophy—but they were without dreams. They had a secure and perfectly adjusted society—but they had nowhere to take it. They had health and longevity beyond the belief of earlier scientists—but all they had to look forward to was death.

Until now—until now when, at Zindorff's summons, Marcou and Orella had come without hope to hear that at last the long-dying human dream lay within reach of fulfillment.

"I will show you what we have done," said the scientist, leading them toward

an oval doorway of gleaming white metal. Here, on the laboratory level as elsewhere within its shelter dome, the city and all in it were designed for functional perfection.

"I only hope you will be able to understand," Zindorff added as he ushered the two aristocrats through ahead of him.

"We both won honors in general science," said Marcou, stooping a little so

that he would not crack his high rather narrow forehead on the seven-foot lintel. It was a little as if he were reminding a clever hunting dog that he too could find game.

IT WAS a long tour—lasting a solid forty minutes and covering a good two kilometers of halls and passageways. With their ingrained logic the scientists had built their engines in order, each representing a further step along the road to the stars.

"Here is an engine that might have taken us to Boötes—if we could have obtained sufficient tritium to power her," said Zindorff, pointing to a monstrous metal pile that seemed almost a solid chunk, without moving parts. Marcou mentioned this fact.

"Yes," said the scientist, nodding, "it came close to being the perfect engine or machine—which of course theoretically *must* be without moving parts. But it is useless."

"A pity," murmured Orella, stroking its metal side as if it were some sort of hairless pet. "It looks so powerful, so deadly."

"You mean dead, Orella," Marcou stated as they moved on.

There were others, some smaller, some larger still, each representative of a step in progress—yet paradoxically each a record of defeat as element after element failed them. Finally they emerged into a bare white room through an oval doorway.

"But—" Orella looked around her in bewilderment. "But this is your office—the room we started from."

"You are observant—and incidentally quite correct." A faint smile lifted the lined features of the scientist.

"If this is some sort of hoax—" began Marcou, reddening.

The scientist shook his head. "It is no hoax," he said. "I have not lied to you. We have found the answer. The Way—a way, rather—has been with us all the time."

He went to his desk, passed behind it,

pressed a button. At once the lights dimmed around them. On the far wall a broad screen became luminous. The two aristocrats looked spellbound at the pictures it revealed, at the commentary Zindorff served as accompaniment.

They saw a strange pink sun, a strange incredibly young and fertile planet of thick blue-cast foliage and turf, of emerald waters, of amiable beasts and a pair of odd oval moons. They saw men and women living there, in a primitive but pleasant settlement—men and women some of whom they recognized.

"What does this mean?" Marcou asked sternly when the lights went on once more. "Are those vidarscenes real?"

"Perfectly—as real as you or I," replied Zindorff. "They were taken on the fourth planet of Alpha Centauri and brought back here."

"When do we go there?" Orella's voice betrayed both eagerness and anxiety. "It looks like heaven. All that space . . ."

"Whenever you are ready—and able," replied Zindorff. "That is what I hope to be able to explain. As you see some of our people have already made the trip."

Marcou took a threatening step toward Zindorff, who continued to regard him with a faint smile from behind the desk. "You actually mean that you traitorous scientists and your accomplices have deserted us. I thought it odd that the halls were empty on this level just now. I had meant to speak of it but . . ."

"Zindorff!" cried Orella and there were agony and terror in her voice now. "You haven't!"

"We intend to leave the path open for all who can follow," replied the scientist. "We know our duty—as well as our rights."

"You had no right not to inform us of the other levels as to your escape," Marcou said almost savagely. The veneer of a dozen centuries of careful

breeding and rearing had been stripped from him by a terror for which he was utterly unprepared.

"The information is all here," Zindorff told him with sympathy. He gestured from the buttons on his desk to the wall upon which the pictures had been shown. "You see, each of us must find the way himself. The ultimate engine was very different, when we found it, from the sort of machine we had expected."

"I'M NOT sure I believe you," muttered Marcou unhappily.

"Don't be a fool," said Orella with unbecoming sharpness. "Of course Zindorff isn't lying. Zindorff—what is this machine?"

"Ourselves," said the scientist quietly. "Cremenzi, the religious philosopher, discovered the key through study of the old miracles and faith cures. There is no limit to human teleportation and survival ability once the mind is fully employed to the final cell in tune with the whole body. Until recently only a few men, lost in the clouds of history, possessed the gift. A thousand years ago it was wrongly called the 'psi' quality."

"You mean . . .?" Marcou leaned against the nearest wall, frowning as he sought to absorb this appallingly new idea. "You mean there is no transportation, no starship?"

"Each of us must provide his own,"

Zindorff told him.

"But we cannot—we have had neither breeding nor training for this sort of thing," cried Orella. All at once she was suppliant woman, suppliant woman through the ages. "Surely you can give us some sort of *help*?"

"Very little, I fear," said the scientist. "And now that I have told you I must leave you—for the blue planet. There is much work to do, much to be built, much to make ready." He sat down slowly in a chair behind his desk, visibly composed himself for concentration.

Marcou sprang forward from the wall, lunged around the desk—seeking to restrain Zindorff, to hold him, to obtain from him further reassurance, further aid. But he found himself staring stupidly at a scrap of white mineral cloth torn from a corner of Zindorff's robe. The scientist himself had vanished without trace.

A little later Orella came to him as he stood there, nuzzled against him, not like a lover but rather like a frightened animal seeking reassurance through physical contact with its own kind. Hesitantly her fingers moved toward the buttons before her.

"Well," she said, suddenly practical, "apparently we've got to learn how." But though her voice was steady the eyes she turned toward Marcou were utterly without hope—as were those into which she gazed.

