

Weird Tales



ALL STORIES NEW — NO REPRINTS

SEPTEMBER, 1948

Cover by Lee Brown Coye

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Except for personal experiences the contents of this magazine is fiction. Any use of the name of any living person or reference to actual events is purely coincidental.

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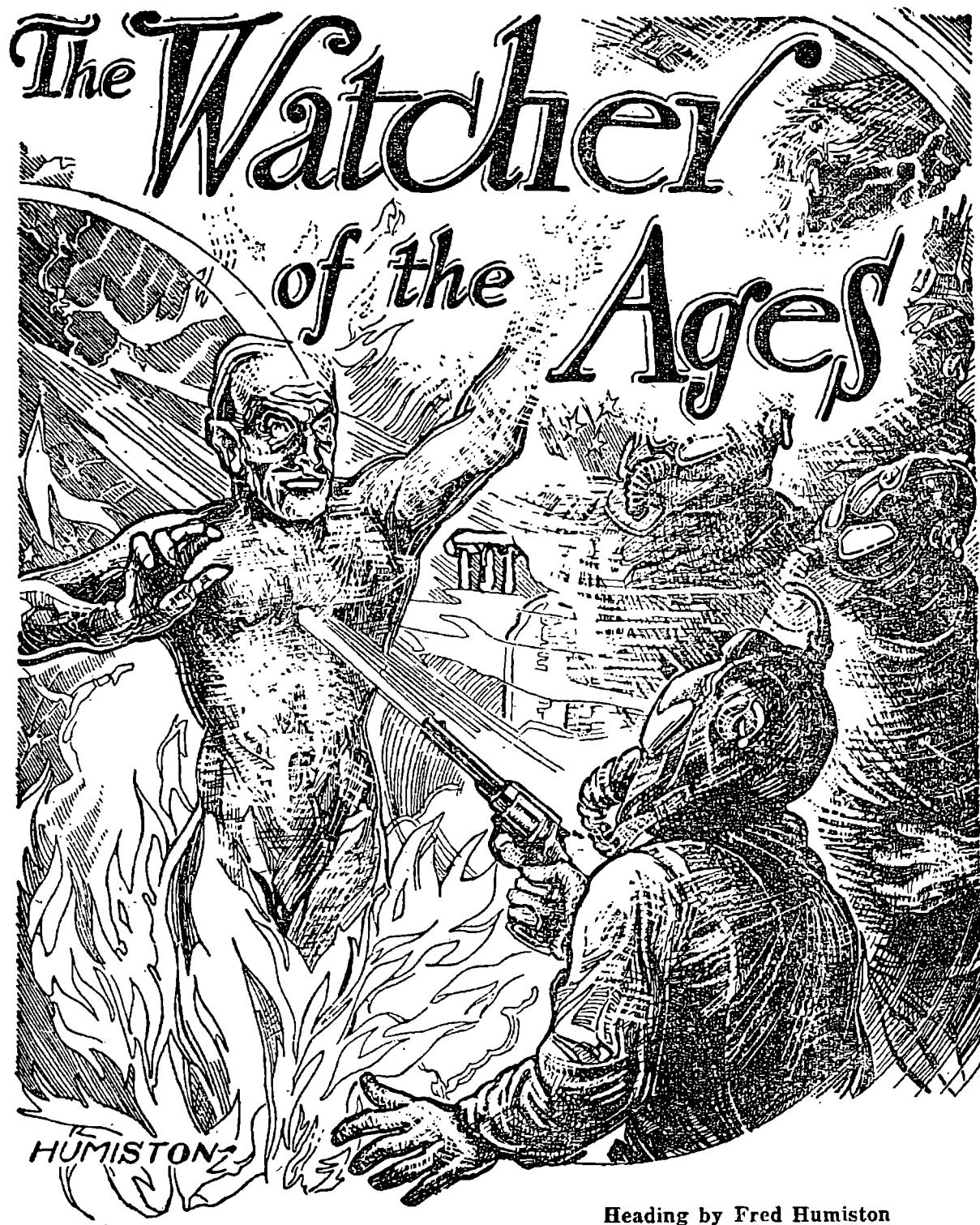
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Heading by Fred Humiston

STANDING in the dusk of that ruined, long-dead city in the Brazilian wilderness, I read aloud again the inscription that was a voice from the remotest past.

"To the men of after-ages, this warning of Thahn of Yor! Seek not the hidden secret, the cold flame that burns forever . . ."

I asked Follansbee, who stood beside me, "Do you suppose that warning is true?"

BY EDMOND HAMILTON

"Seek not the hidden secret, the cold flame that burns forever . . ."

He looked at me a little scornfully. "What kind of geologist are you to believe such nonsense, Adams?"

"I don't know," I murmured. "I've been in this Matto Grosso country before, and there are queer things in it."

"Though you see him not, there is an undying Watcher who guards that secret from evil men, and whose eyes even now are upon you!"

We were standing in the bush-grown quadrangle that had been the central plaza of the ancient city. Before us, in front of the shattered north portico, loomed the column on which was graven the inscription.

It was past sunset, and the rapid tropical twilight was fast deepening. In the dusk, the ruins loomed dark and solemn around us. It was a ruin as impressive as Angkor, this dead city in the Matto Grosso jungle.

Great colonnades and walls of massive stone, riven and shattered, and streets of stone houses empty and dead, rose starkly from orchid-laden trees and undergrowth. Low, rocky mountains rose a few miles northward. Around it, stretched the great forest.

This dead metropolis had been lost to the knowledge of the outside world ever since it had been found by Portuguese *bandeiristas* in 1753. Many had searched for it in the intervening two centuries, lured by the account of those hardy old goldseekers which is still preserved in the National Library of Brazil.

The trackless jungle had defeated them all. And some, it had simply swallowed, like the famous Colonel Fawcett who in 1925 had made a determined final attempt to re-discover the dead metropolis.

Fawcett had believed that the ancient Portuguese' accounts of "a light that shone and never went out" were based upon some development of atomic science by a South American civilization of the most ancient past. The explorer had said so, in his last cablegram to a London newspaper before he disappeared.

"This tale suggests that the ancient South Americans had rays, perhaps unknown to modern science, in the research of the atom," he had cabled, before plunging into the wilderness, never to return.

Finally our own party, the Pollock-Stin-

son Geological Expedition, had taken up the search. The clue that Fawcett had followed seemed to indicate the presence of radioactive minerals near the lost, dead city. And such minerals were important in these days of released atomic energy.

Dr. John Pollock, eminent geologist, headed the expedition. But it had been organized and really led, so far, by that aggressive mine-promoter, Victor Stinson. He was to have full rights to all minerals other than radioactive ones, which were discovered.

Follansbee and I were the associate geologists. I had been accepted despite my lack of scholarly titles, because I had been in the Matto Grosso region before.

THREE is no need to tell of the months we had spent fruitlessly searching the vast region between the Tapajoz and Xingu Rivers. Time after time we had gone astray. The expedition would have been abandoned had it not been for Stinson. He was a ruthless driver, and he had kept us and our Indians going until finally he came upon the dead city.

He and Dr. Pollock were hopeful now of soon finding the radioactive deposits which legend placed near here. They had scoffed at this ominous warning inscription whose translation I had read for them.

"How can anyone tell what that queer old pothook writing means?" Stinson had demanded incredulously.

"Reproductions of this writing are in the old Portuguese manuscript in the National Library, and have been studied and deciphered," I told them.

And now I again translated aloud, as Follansbee and I stood facing the ancient inscription in the deepening twilight:

"I, Tharl of Yor mastered the secret of the cold fire that can kindle life. And with it, I kindled life in the lifeless semblance of humanity that I had made with my skill. I created one who is manlike but not man, one not mortal like us but undying."

"But the greed and ambition of the people of Yor made them covet my secret. They, too, wished to create life, and for evil purposes. Therefore, I used the powers that were mine to shatter this city, Yor, forever."

"I shall die soon. But I shall leave behind me one who will be faithful to my command, who will prevent evil men from ever using the cold fire. Yes, I shall leave behind me the undying one I created, the Watcher who will protect the secret for all the ages to come! You who read, beware—for the Watcher's eyes are upon you now!"

Follansbee said skeptically, when I had finished, "A fine old piece of superstition!"

I reminded him, "Yet we came here looking for radioactive deposits. And the 'cold fire' it refers to, can only be such."

Follansbee shrugged his lanky shoulders. "Personally, I think Stinson has backed a wild-goose chase. It's a fine trip for us geologists. But I wouldn't invest my dough in ancient legends."

He added, grinning, "Especially legends about creating a synthetic human being, a Watcher who is undying."

He had raised his voice. And as we turned away, from all the dark, looming walls around us the echo murmured back through the dusk.

"... undying undying . . ."

I said no more as we walked back to camp, for Follansbee was a born skeptic.

Camp had been pitched amid the ruins in an open space that had a spring. In one of the open-sided thatched huts that had been run up, Dr. Pollock and Stinson were going over maps by lantern-light. Slavin and Geer, the two burly trail-bosses, were preparing supper.

Our Indian pack-porters had built their huts a little distance away. They were gathered there now near a fire, a dozen stocky, copper-skinned Bororo tribesmen. They were squatting around a cinnamon tree in whose side they had cut a rude ladder, and they were very silent.

Stinson came out of the hut and nodded his bullet head brusquely toward the silent, squatting Indians.

He said to me, "You know something about the Indians of this country, Adams. What are they up to?"

"They're holding a *ngillatun*," I told him.

"And what's that?"

"It's a divination ceremony. They're going to ask their dead ancestors for advice. I think they're afraid of these ruins."

Stinson made a sound of disgust. "A lot

of damned mumbo-jumbo. This place reeks with it."

Two of the Bororos had started to play the ceremonial flutes, a thin, wailing sound. Another had dug a small hole at the base of the sacred ladder-tree, the *rewe*.

He held a trapped bird over the little excavation. A knife flashed, and the bird's blood dripped slowly into the hole. The flute wailed on.

Stinson led the way back into the hut, where Dr. Pollock's thin, aging, scholarly face was still bent intently over the maps they had been drawing.

"As I see it," Pollock said, "any radioactive or other minerals here must be in the mountains out there. If there's uranium or thorium ores there, the Geiger counters will soon tell us."

Stinson nodded curtly. "We'll start combing that little range with the Geigers, in the morning."

Pollock looked out into the gathering night. "The stones of this city must have been quarried there. I wonder how many thousands of years ago that—"

BEFORE he could finish there came an interruption. A sudden loud burst of shouts from the Indians.

"Slavin, what the devil's the matter with them now?" demanded Stinson angrily.

The trail-boss stuck his shaggy head into the hut. "Looks like they've got all excited about something, Boss."

Stinson cursed and strode out of the hut. We followed him toward the Bororos.

I saw at once that the *ngillatun* was over. The Indians were talking excitedly among themselves, and were obviously frightened.

"You know their lingo, Adams. Ask them what's eating them now," Stinson ordered.

I obeyed. The Bororo leader was sullenly silent for a few moments, but finally made guttural answer.

I turned back to the others. "He says that their dead ancestors have warned them —have warned them that in this city there is someone who is not human."

There was a little silence among us. And in that silence, the Bororos were looking uneasily around the dark, looming ruins.

"That's very odd, when you remember that inscription," Pollock said thoughtfully.

And he repeated its phrases, ". . . the unlying one whom I created . . . the Watcher whose eyes are upon you now. . . ."

He added slowly, "There could have been a strange, ancient science in this city long ago. But I suppose not even it could have 'created an undying, synthetic man, or android."

"You can just bet it couldn't have," Stinson said harshly. "The damned Indians heard us talking about that inscription, that's all. They know a lot more of our language than they let on."

"Sure, that must be it," the burly Slavin chimed in.

The Bororo leader spoke again to me, briefly and sullenly.

"He says," I told the others, "that they won't stay here long. And that they won't go near the mountains, which are supremely accursed."

The information elated Stinson. "Then that's a sign the deposits we're after *are* over in those mountains!"

He said, "We won't need them for our prospecting over there, so you can tell 'em that. And the boys and I will soon teach them a lesson if they try to run away."

We retired early to the huts, for Stinson intended to start at dawn. As I removed my boots and stretched out in my hammock, I saw Follansbee's lanky figure still standing outside, staring into the darkness.

"Are you wondering if there's really a Watcher lurking out there?" I asked him.

"Don't be absurd," he retorted. "Yet I am wondering how the Indians got the idea in their heads. I could swear none of them understand English."

NEXT morning when I went out of the hut into the dank, gray dawn, it was Follansbee, already up, who met me. And his face now was queer.

"Adams, something's happened! During the night someone got into the supply-hut, tore open a locked steel instrument-case by main strength, and smashed all the Geiger counters!"

I hastened after him to the supply-hut. The other were there, and Stinson's square face was red with fury.

The heavy steel case lay on the ground, its whole end ripped open. The Geiger

counters it had held were now a mass litter of broken metal on the floor.

"The case was locked, and I had the key," Pollock was saying bewilderedly. "But somebody just ripped it open."

"The damned Indians," Stinson accused harshly. "Their crazy superstitions made them do this to stop us."

"The Bororos wouldn't even know what a Geiger counter is," I objected. "And they wouldn't be strong enough to rip a steel case like a cardboard box. That took super-human strength!"

STINSON turned on me. "It was this Watcher of yours, I suppose? This undying, synthetic man?"

He made an angry, derisive sound, and then continued, "But the superstitious idiots haven't stopped us. I had a Geiger in my pack, in case I wanted to prospect along the trail. And they didn't get that!"

He planned curtly. "We'll get started for those mountains, before the brutes can think up more sabotage to stop us. Geer, you'll stay here with a gun handy to watch them while we're gone."

By sunrise, we were tramping out of the bush-grown ruins toward the low, rocky range northward. The burly Slavin led the way, his machete slashing a path for us through the jungle. We all wore pistols at our belts, and Stinson carried the last, precious Geiger in his own hands.

It was already stickily hot by the time we came out of the jungle onto the lower slopes of the range. The mountains were impressive now—frowning cliffs and scarps of dark rock, split by cracks and crevasses.

Pollock looked slightly depressed as he studied the strata. "It's not the sort of formation in which you'd expect to find uranium or thorium."

"The Geiger will tell us," Stinson retorted. "We'll start working our way westward along the range."

For hours, we moved slowly along the lower slopes of the mountains. Stinson carried the Geiger, and watched it constantly. But it gave no indication of the nearness of radioactivity.

He swore viciously. "With the other counters we could have split up and covered the whole range in a few days."

Follansbee looked at me with a shade of worry on his lean face as we went on.

"What do you think could have torn that steel case open, Adams?"

I shrugged. "I don't want to speculate."

"What gets me," he said, "is that it must have been done very *slowly*, so as not to make a noise. No human being ever had such strength as that."

At that moment came an exultant shout from Stinson, ahead of us. He had stopped in front of a narrow crack that here cleft mountain.

"Listen to this!" he exclaimed, as we hurried up to him.

There came a click from the Geiger. And then, after a few moments, another one.

Stinson behaved now like a hound on a scent. He strode forward along the cliff, then back the way we had come. The Geiger fell silent.

He went into the narrow cleft in the cliff. And immediately the Geiger clicked again.

"It's somewhere in here! Come on!"

Slavin led the way with a flashlight. For the crack in the cliff was a mere crevice leading into the dark heart of the mountain.

The tempo of the Geiger's clicking rapidly quickened, until it became a steady rattle.

"We're getting close!" Stinson exclaimed.

Then Slavin suddenly recoiled upon us, and shouted. "Look out—there's a step-off!"

His flashlight showed a dark, empty abyss ahead.

We got down on our knees, and crawled carefully forward to the brink of the abyss.

IT WAS a vast, dark emptiness that lay before us—a gigantic natural pit that dropped far down into the roots of the range.

And down there on the floor of the pit, far, far below, there was a strange blaze of luridly opalescent light.

"Radioactivity to the *n*th degree, down there!" Pollock said, awedly. "No wonder the Geiger's gone mad!"

"We can get down!" Stinson said eagerly. He had been angling the flashlight beam downward. "Look at that path!"

Just a little below the brink on which we

crouched, was a little projecting ledge of rock. From it, there led downward a steep, narrow path in the rocky side of the pit.

"That path was *cut*!" Follansbee said. "Someone long ago made it, to go down to that center of radioactivity. Do you suppose that means—"

"Let's have no more crazy talk about Watchers and all that, now that we've got our hands right on what we're after!" Stinson flared.

"We can't go down into radioactivity like that," I protested.

"Yes, we can," Pollock contradicted. "I included protective suits in our equipment, in case prolonged work with radioactive materials became necessary."

"Follansbee, you and Slavin go back and get them," Stinson ordered. "We'll wait for you."

We waited, out at the entrance of the cleft. By mid-afternoon, the two returned with the protective garments.

They were merely coveralls that had quilted lead foil sewn inside their linings, and had cowl-like hoods of similar fabric.

The garments were loose and bulky but not oppressively heavy. When we had put them on, Stinson led the way back to that precarious path into the pit.

Follansbee had brought more flashlights, and their beams helped us to climb safely down to that little ledge, one by one. Then, necessarily in single file, we started down the path.

We hugged the rock closely as we followed the steep, narrow trail. It dropped down the side of the vast pit in a zigzag.

The flashlights' beams were lost in the awesome darkness of that place. But steadily the lurid, opalescent glow of light far below seemed to grow stronger.

"I think we've made the biggest radioactive-mineral strike ever!" Stinson exulted, as he led downward. "It could be worth millions—"

"It isn't a question of monetary value," Pollock reminded him. "All radioactive minerals we find go to the University laboratories, by our agreement."

"And I get rights to anything else we find," Stinson said. "Sure, I remember."

I was the last in line as we descended the dizzy pathway. And I saw Follansbee, just

ahead of me, turn more than once to glance back up the way we had come.

I guessed what was in his mind. He was wondering if an unseen Watcher was following us down into this abyss.

IT TOOK us two hours to reach the bottom of the great pit. Upon its floor, Stinson and Pollock and even the brutal Slavin stopped and stared in amazement.

The pit was a half-mile across. And its floor and lower rocky sides were eerily lighted by the lurid, flickering glow that came from the thing at its center.

The rock floor there sank into a big bowl. And in that natural cuplike hollow, there smouldered and burned and brooded a domed mass of glowing rock. It was like a gigantic opal, blazing in sullen splendor here at the bottom of the abyss.

We stood, five strange figures in our bulky protective garments and cowlled hoods and lead-glass goggles, staring at that glowing mass.

"Unprecedented!" whispered Pollock. "A late extrusion of primal radioactive matter from Earth's interior, into this buried pocket!"

Follansbee's voice was hoarse. "We're standing in radiation that would blast us, but for these suits."

Stinson paid them no attention. He seemed immune both to wonder and apprehension, gripped by a stronger emotion.

"There are things there—around the sides of that cup," he said eagerly. "By heaven—"

He started to run forward. Pollock shouted a warning, but the promoter paid no heed.

We followed, after a moment. We came to the brink of the cup, where Stinson and Slavin already stood.

Stinson pointed downward. "And I thought that inscription was just ancient nonsense. Look there!"

We saw what he saw. There were niches cut in the rock sides of the cup—a dozen of them, around that burning radioactive mass.

And in the niches were tables and pedestals of solid lead, upon which were lead and tungsten vessels and instruments. Some of these resembled modern scientific apparatus, but others were quite different.

"The laboratory of Tharl of Yor!" whispered Follansbee.

"It's true, then!" Pollock said dazedly. "There have been men of science on Earth in the lost past, as legend told. A science as great or greater than our own."

"You still don't *get* it!" Stinson cried. "Look at that thing on stilts, that glass mold!"

We looked. It was in one of the niches a little around the rim of the cup from where we stood.

It was a transparent, glittering mold of a man's body. It was raised upon leaden legs so that it stood in the very heart of the ragging radiation—and it was empty.

Awe fell upon Pollock's face. "A mold of a human body. And the inscription of Tharl said—"

"That he'd created an undying synthetic man, an android! And had kindled life in his creation, by this terrific radiation!" Stinson finished.

Follansbee turned a white, stunned face toward me. "Then it's true, Adams! There was—there still *is*—a Watcher! A man born in this radiation, and left by Tharl to guard this place!"

His gaze roved the interior of the great pit, illuminated by the shaking splendor of the radioactive blaze before us.

"It *was* that Watcher, then, whom the Indians claimed was in the dead city, and who smashed our Geigers! He's somewhere near—"

"Is that all this means to you?" shouted Stinson. "Can't you see what we've stumbled upon?"

His voice was shaking with excitement.

"The secret of the creation of life, of the creation of synthetic men! It's all here, in these instruments and in this terrific radiation! A secret worth empires!"

We stared at him. In the shaking light, the man's square face was crimson with emotion.

"I don't understand you," Pollock said. "Such a secret of creating synthetic life would revolutionize biological science, yes. But how could it have any commercial value?"

Stinson laughed. The silent pit rang and echoed with that harsh laughter.

"You scientists that can't see beyond your

own laboratory walls!" he exclaimed. "By God, even Slavin here could see it!"

He rushed on. "What nation wouldn't give everything it's got for the secret of creating men—men who might not be quite human but who would be better than human for fighting a war?"

I saw comprehension come upon the faces of Pollock and Follansbee. I saw the same loathing that I felt, show in their features, as they stared at Stinson.

"You're joking," Pollock said thickly. "No man would seriously propose using this discovery for such a monstrous purpose."

"He's not joking," I said. "He means it."

Stinson stood, facing us with his hands on his hips, and seeming to enjoy that moment.

"Yes. I mean it. And what are you going to do about it?"

And then we saw that Slavin, in obedience to some private signal, had drawn his pistol and was leveling it at us.

Stinson stepped behind us, and took our guns from our belts. And then he stood before us again, and mocked us.

"You poor, pitiful fools! I always meant to do this, if we found anything worth taking. It's why I brought my own two men along."

"You never meant to live up to that agreement?" Pollock said, incredulously.

Slavin guffawed at that, and Stinson grinned. "The only good of that piece of paper was to get you to help me find this. And now its usefulness—and yours!—are over."

I do not think that Dr. Pollock, even then, comprehended the man's deadly intention. But Follansbee did.

"You're going to murder us? How will you explain that?"

"Easily," mocked Stinson. "There are so many accidents possible on a jungle expedition. I'll be very grieved when I tell you of your sad end. And I'll tell nothing at all of this discovery, except to the right people."

The veins of his neck corded, and his voice thickened. "The people, the country, that can pay the highest for a secret that will give them limitless expendable armies! Billions will be a cheap price for that!"

He had his own heavy pistol in his hand now.

"If you turn around," he said, "it will make it easier for all of us."

I spoke then. I said, "You've forgotten something, Stinson."

"Yes? What?"

I said, "You've forgotten the Watcher."

Stinson laughed. "If that Watcher still exists, Slavin and I will take care of him when he appears. But first, we'll take care of you."

"The Watcher has already appeared," I told him. "He's right here with us."

His face grew ugly. "Now I get it, Adams. You're going to yell, 'Look out, the Watcher is behind you!' And you think we'll be simple enough to turn around."

"No," I said, "the Watcher isn't behind you. He's right in front of you."

"I suppose he's invisible?" Stinson mocked. "I suppose I can't see him?"

"You can see him," I said. And then I said, "You're talking to him, Stinson. I am the Watcher."

THREE was a little silence.

Then Slavin laughed. He threw back his shaggy head in a guffaw, and Stinson's harsh laughter joined in.

"You, the Watcher?" Stinson said. "You poor fool, fright has turned your wits. You're just Lane Adams, the free-lance geologist we picked up in Rio."

"Yes," I nodded. "My name is Lane Adams now. But it hasn't always been that. I've had other names, in the past."

"I was Gonzales de Tormes of New Spain, a hundred-odd years ago. I was Henri Delaun, in medieval France. I was Tiberious Flavians in ancient Rome, and was the sea-captain Lurios in old Atlantis. Names? I've had hundreds of them, in the six thousand years I've lived."

"You see, I've wandered the world a lot in those sixty centuries. Through nations, empires, cities, watching them rise and rule and fall. I've seen all recorded history. And I've seen what men like you can do with power when they get it, Stinson."

Pollock and Follansbee were staring at me with the sick look of men who look upon one suddenly gone mad.

And Stinson and Slavin were grinning.

They, too, thought me crazy. And they were enjoying it.

"But if you're the Watcher who was left to protect this place, why did you leave it?" Stinson mocked.

I answered, "Thanl's secret was safe here after the jungle swallowed ruined Yor. It was only when the Portuguese first found this place, a couple of centuries ago, that I had to come back to this land to guard it.

"I've watched every expedition that tried to find this place—and have blocked or led them astray. Just as I led this one astray—only you insisted on coming on."

By now, I think, Stinson had begun to sense dimly that I was speaking truth. I think that the rage that flamed up in his face now was born of budding fear.

"So you're the Watcher, Adams? The undying one? Let's see if you're still undying, after this!"

His pistol roared. I felt the shock of the slug tearing through my chest. I felt the shock but no pain.

I stood, and smiled at Stinson.

"Yes, the bullet hit me," I told him. "It would have torn through a vital organ if I were a man.

"But I'm not a man, Stinson. Not a man like you. I don't have the vital organs you have, and a bullet through my tissues can't kill me."

"He's wearing a bullet-proof vest, or something!" shouted Slavin.

"No," I said. "I'm not. I'll show you."

I threw off the protective hood and cover-all garment. I threw off my other clothing, and took off the false hair and eyebrows that I had always worn when among men.

I stood there before them what I was—an android, an artificial man, hairless, smooth-skinned, different. I stood in the raging radiation that would have killed a human being, and smiled at them.

"God!" said Pollock thickly. "Look at his chest—that wound—"

They were all looking at it—at the wound the slug had made in my rubbery, synthetic flesh. The wound, even as they watched, was slowly closing.

"He is the Watcher!" whispered Follansbee, staring wildly at me.

"He ain't human—we can't kill him!" yelled Slavin, his eyes bulging in fright.

But Stinson kept his nerve. "Not with pistols, we can't," he said harshly. "But there's some things even an android can't survive. Throw him down into that radioactive fire!"

He yelled that last to Slavin as he charged. The two of them came at me together with deadly intent.

I let them reach me. And just as they grabbed at me, my arms shot out and gathered them in.

The superhuman strength of my synthetic body, the strength that no human could ever possess, crushed them close to me.

Stinson, raging, had his hands around my neck trying to strangle me. To strangle me, who had no need to breathe! Slavin was hammering at my face.

I lifted them. And, disregarding their murderous assault, I half-carried, half-dragged them toward the brink of the sunken cup of radioactive fire.

Then I put forth all my strength. I hurled them down into that cup, straight down into the great, blazing, radioactive mass.

THEIR hoods had fallen back in the fight, and their unprotected heads plunged into that sullen, lurid glow. There was a short and terrible screaming.

And then, down there, there were only two black, dead forms withering in the burning blast of the deadly fires.

I turned slowly. Pollock and Follansbee stood, frozen by horror, staring at me.

"I'm not going to harm you," I told them. "I know you had no such sinister designs to exploit this secret as Stinson had. You can go."

Follansbee stumbled a step toward me. "Adams"—he began, and then choked—"Oh, God, you're not Adams! You're not a human man at all, at all!"

"No," I said. "I'm not a human man. I wasn't born of woman, but of fire and force and matter, and the skill of Tharl. And that was long ago."

Long ago? Yes, and all the accumulated weariness of those six thousand years seemed to press upon me as I spoke the words.

Six thousand years of memories pressing down upon me! Memories that began

in this same firelit pit where first I had awakened to life and consciousness and had looked up into the wise and gentle face of Tharl, my creator.

Memories of the evil people of Yor who had clamored for the secret of my creation, and of how Tharl had used his powers to shatter their city forever. And of Tharl, dying years later, and of my promise to him that I would watch over the secret of creation so that evil men might not attain it.

Of my wandering forth into the world, when Yor and the secret were safely locked in by jungle; of drinking wine with the other helmed sea-captains down in the harbor wine-shops of great Atlantis; of watching Esarhaddon lead the wolf-hordes of Assyria to the conquest of Egypt; of watching the Roman legions stamp out Carthage, of watching the kingdoms of Europe and Asia clash in combat from the Dark Ages until now.

War and ruin, dark ambition and pride and evil—how much of them had I not seen in those six thousand years I wandered the face of Earth! But now, I knew, my wanderings were about to come to an end at last.

I spoke to Follansbee and Pollock. I said, "Go now. And do not return to this place, ever."

"We won't," said Pollock hoarsely. "Nor will we tell the world of what lies here. It's better if men don't learn that now."

I watched them go, climbing shakily up the narrow path to the outside world.

Then I stood, alone, and looked around the firelit pit that had been my strange birthplace. Now, it was going to become my tomb.

For my resolve was taken. I had guarded this greatest secret of Earth for sixty centuries. I had done so because Tharl had believed that soon men would become wise enough to use this secret well.

But I, who have watched the races of

man for six thousand years, knew better now. Not for ages, I knew, would man be worthy of this power of creation.

And I could not wait and wander for more long, long ages! I craved the rest of death that had always been denied me.

So I would seal up the secret. I could do it. Tharl's instruments here, which long ago he had taught me how to use, could cause a diastrophic convulsion that would collapse the whole mountain upon this pit.

Ages will pass before the forces of erosion will again uncover the secret fire of creation. By that time, man will have left brutishness behind him and will be worthy of this power. Either that, or he will have destroyed himself.

MY PREPARATIONS are made. Soon now, I shall release the forces that will cause the convulsion. And as destruction thunders down into the pit, I shall step into the radioactive fires whose radiation long ago kindled my life—the sullen fires which alone can consume and destroy my body.

But first, I have been writing this tale of my watch and the reasons for it. And the writing I shall encase and leave in an upper cleft of the mountain so that some day it will be found, and read, as a record and a warning.

Is it strange that I, the undying Watcher of the ages, look forward so eagerly to the rest of death. Perhaps it is.

And yet, I have a hope. I am no human man, but perhaps even an android can have a soul or spirit that will live on after death.

If it is so, then I shall soon see again the only man of men who ever loved me—wise Tharl, who created me long ago. I shall see him, and make report of how I performed the age-long task he laid upon me.

Or is my hope but a vain dream? I shall soon know.