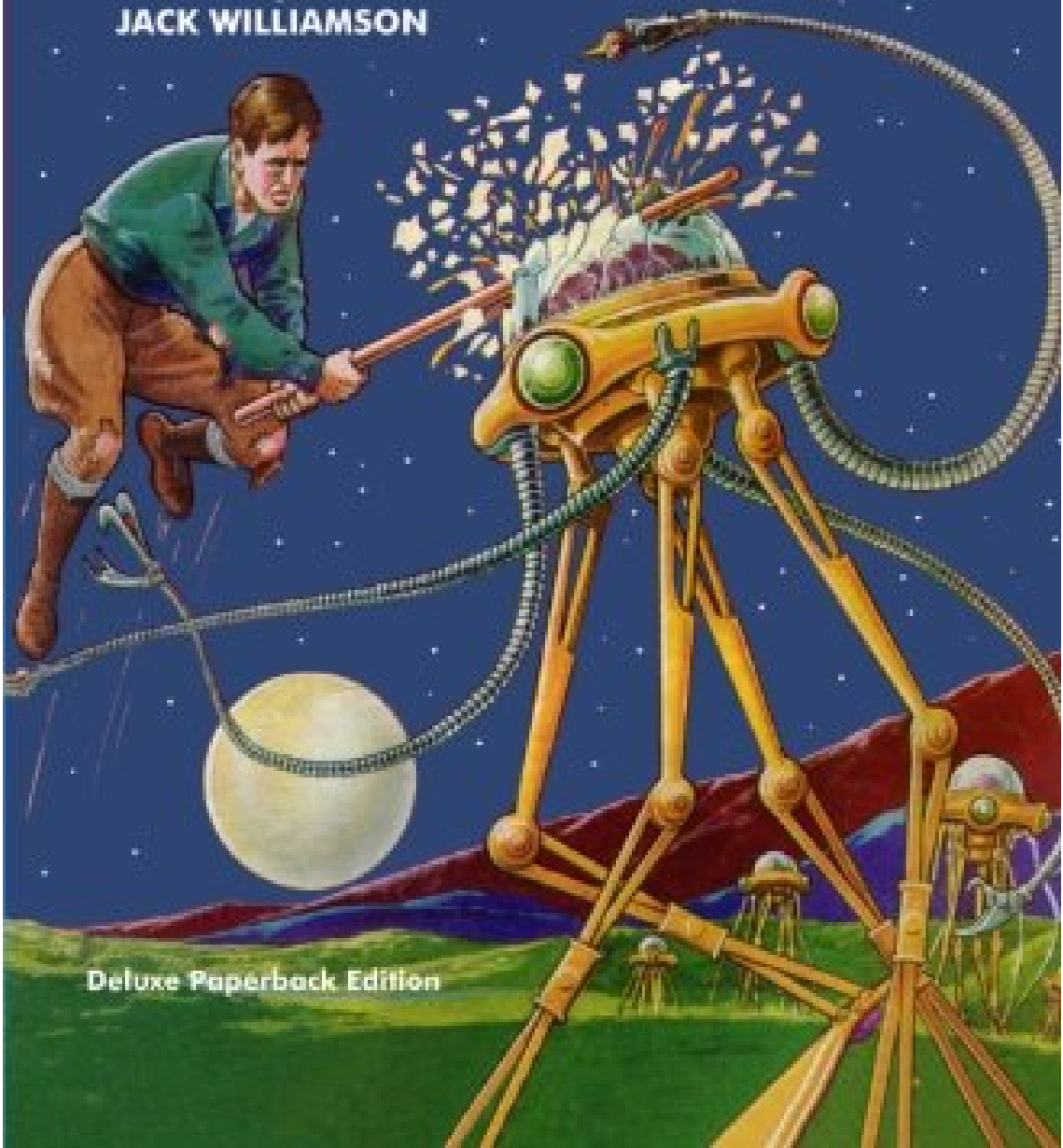
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TWO COMPLETE NOVELS

COULD HE SAVE THE LONE SURVIVOR OF AN ANCIENT ALIEN RACE?

THE MOON ERA

By
JACK WILLIAMSON



Deluxe Paperback Edition

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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK
THE MOON ERA ***

The Moon Era

By JACK WILLIAMSON

**By the author of "The Alien Intelligence,"
"Twelve Hours to Live," etc., etc.,**

Illustration by Paul

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JACK WILLIAMSON

Jack Williamson has properly been called a first-rate writer of colorful tales. His "Alien Intelligence" published in the early days of SCIENCE WONDER STORIES *placed him, in the estimation of our readers, in the class of A. Merrit and other masters. The present story carries on Mr. Williamson's gripping portrayal of the possibilities of science on other worlds.*

It is quite within reason that our moon, now dead and barren, was once the scene of flourishing life. Although no water now exists there, nor air shields from the moon the intense solar rays, in another age the moon may have been bountifully endowed by nature. If that is true, then the picture of the Eternal Ones drawn by our author is certainly a colorful portrayal of what the

lunar civilization may have been like. And the picture of the Mother, and her exciting and bizarre adventures with our hero, are, in our opinion, among some of the best drawn by any author of science fiction.

We were seated at dinner in the long dining room of my uncle's Long Island mansion. There was glistening silver plate, and the meal had been served with a formality to which I was unaccustomed. I was ill at ease, though my uncle and I sat alone at the table. The business of eating, without committing an egregious blunder before the several servants, took all my attention.

It was the first time I had ever seen my uncle, Enfield Conway. A tall man, stiffly erect, dressed severely in black. His face, though lean, was not emaciated as is usual at his age of seventy years. His hair, though almost perfectly white, was abundant, parted on the side. His eyes were blue, and strong; he wore no glasses.

A uniformed chauffeur had met me at the station, in the afternoon. The butler had sent an entirely unnecessary valet to my luxurious room. I had not met my uncle until he came down to the dining room.

"I suppose, Stephen, you are wondering why I sent for you," he said in his precise manner, when the servants had carried away the last course, leaving cigars, and a bottle of mineral water for him.

I nodded. I had been instructor of history in a small high school in Texas, where his telegram had

reached me. There had been no explanation; merely a summons to Long Island.

"You are aware that some of my patents have been quite profitable."

Again I nodded. "The evidence surrounds me."

"Stephen, my fortune amounts to upwards of three and a half million. How should you like to be my heir?"

"Why, sir—I should not refuse. I'd like very much to be."

"You can, if you wish, earn that fortune. And fifty thousand a year while I live."

I pushed back the chair and rose to my feet in excitement. Such riches were beyond my dreams! I felt myself trembling.

"Anything—" I stammered. "I'll do anything you say, to earn that! It means—"

"Wait," he said, looking at me calmly. "You don't know yet what I require. Don't commit yourself too soon."

"What is it?" I asked, in a quivering voice.

"Stephen, I have been working in my private laboratory here for eleven years. I have been building a machine. The best of my brains have gone into that machine. Hundreds of thousands of dollars. The efforts of able engineers and skilled mechanics.

"Now the machine is finished. It is to be tested. The engineers who worked with me refused to try the machine. They insist that it is very dangerous.

"And I am too old to make the trial. It will take a young man, with strength, endurance, and courage.

"You are young, Stephen. You look vigorous enough. I suppose your health is good? A sound heart? That's the main thing."

"I think so," I told him. "I've been coaching the Midland football team. And it isn't many years since I was playing college football, myself."

"And you have no dependents?"

"None.—But what is this machine?"

"I will show you. Come."

He rose, agilely enough for one of his seventy years, and led the way from the long room. Through several magnificent rooms of the big house. Out into the wide, landscaped grounds, beautiful and still in the moonlight.

I followed silently. My brain was confusion. A whirl of mad thought. All this wealth whose evidence surrounded me might be my own! I cared nothing for luxury, for money itself. But the fortune would mean freedom from the thankless toil of pedagogy. Books. Travel. Why I could see with my own eyes the scenes of history's dramatic moments! Finance research expeditions of my own! Delve with my own hands for the secrets of Egypt's sands, uncover the age-old enigmas of ruined mounds that once were proud cities of the East!

We approached a rough building,—resembling an airplane hangar,—of galvanized iron, which glistened like silver in the rays of the full moon.

Without speaking, Uncle Enfield produced a key from his pocket, unlocked the heavy padlock on the door. He entered the building, switching on electric lights inside it.

"Come in," he said. "Here it is. I'll explain it as well as I can."

I walked through the narrow doorway and uttered an involuntary exclamation of surprise at sight of the huge machine that rested upon the clean concrete floor.

Two huge disks of copper, with a cylinder of bright, chromium-plated metal between them. Its shape vaguely suggested that of an ordinary spool of adhesive plaster, from which a little has been used—the polished cylinder, which was of smaller diameter than the disks, took the place of the roll of plaster.

The lower of the massive disks rested on the concrete floor. Its diameter was about twenty feet. The cylinder above it was about sixteen feet in diameter, and eight feet high. The copper disk above was the same size as the lower one.

Small round windows stared from the riveted metal plates forming the cylinder. The whole was like a building, it burst on me. A circular room with bright metal walls. Copper floor and copper roof projecting beyond those walls.

My uncle walked to the other side of this astounding mechanism. He turned a projecting knob. An oval door, four feet high, swung inward in the curving wall. Four inches thick. Of plated steel. Fitting very tightly against cushions of rubber.

My uncle climbed through the door, into the dark interior. I followed with a growing sense of wonder and excitement. I groped toward him through the darkness. Then I heard the click of a switch, and

lights flashed on within the round chamber.

I gazed about me in astonishment.

Walls, floor, and ceiling were covered with soft, white fiber. The little room was crowded with apparatus. Clamped against one white wall was a row of the tall steel flasks in which commercial oxygen is compressed. Across the room was a bank of storage batteries. The walls were hung with numerous instruments, all clamped neatly in place. Sextants. Compasses. Pressure gauges. Numerous dials whose functions were not apparent. Cooking utensils. An automatic pistol. Cameras. Telescopes. Binoculars.

In the center of the room stood a table or cabinet, with switches, dials, and levers upon its top. A heavy cable, apparently of aluminum, ran from it to the ceiling.

I was gazing about in bewilderment. "I don't understand all this—" I began.

"Naturally," said my uncle. "It is quite a novel invention. Even the engineers who built it did not understand it. I confess that the theory of it is yet beyond me. But what happens is quite simple.

"Eleven years ago, Steven, I discovered a new phenomenon. I had happened to charge two parallel copper plates, whose distances apart had a certain very definite relation to their combined masses, with a high tension current at a certain frequency.

"The plates, Stephen, were in some way—how, I do not pretend to understand—cut out of the earth's gravitational field. Insulated from gravity. The effect extended to any object placed between them. By a slight variation of the current's strength, I was able

to increase the repulsion, until the plates pulled upward with a force approximately equal to their own weight.

"My efforts to discover the reason for this phenomenon—it is referred to in my notes as the Conway Effect—have not been successful. But I have built this machine to make a practical application of it. Now that it is finished, the four engineers who helped design it have deserted. They refused to assist with any trials."

"Why?" I asked.

"Muller, who had the construction in charge, somehow came to the conclusion that the suspension or reversal of gravity was due to motion in a fourth dimension. He claimed that he had experimental proof of his theory, by building models of the device, setting the dials, and causing them to vanish. I would have none of it. But the other men seemed to accept his ideas. At any rate, they refused with him to have any part in the tests. They thought they would vanish, like Muller says his models did, and not come back."

"The thing is supposed to rise above the ground?" I asked.

"Quite so." My uncle smiled. "When the force of gravitation is merely suspended, it should fly off the earth at a tangent, due to the diurnal rotation. This initial velocity, which in these latitudes, amounts to considerably less than one thousand miles per hour, can be built up at will, by reversing gravitation, and falling away from the earth."

"*Falling away from the earth!*" I was staggered. "And where is one to fall?"

"This machine was designed for a trip to the moon. At the beginning of the voyage, gravitation will be merely cut out, allowing the machine to fly off on a tangent, toward the point of intersection with the moon's orbit. Safely beyond the atmosphere, repulsion can be used to build up the acceleration. Within the gravitational sphere of the moon, positive gravitation can be utilized further to increase the speed. And reversed gravitation to retard the velocity, to make possible a safe landing. The return will be made in the same manner."

I was staring at him blankly. A trip to the moon seemed insane, beyond reason. Especially for a professor of history, with only a modicum of scientific knowledge. And it must be dangerous, if those engineers—. But three million—what dangers would I not face for such a fortune?

"Everything has been done," he went on, "to insure the comfort and safety of the passenger. The walls are insulated with a fiber composition especially worked out to afford protection from the cold of space, and from the unshielded radiation of the sun. The steel armor is strong enough not only to hold the necessary air pressure, but to stop any ordinary meteoric particles.

"You notice the oxygen cylinders, for maintaining that essential element in the air. There is automatic apparatus for purifying it. It is pumped through caustic soda to absorb the carbon dioxide, and through refrigerator tubes to condense the excess moisture.

"The batteries, besides energizing the plates, are amply powerful to supply lights and heat for cooking.

"That, I believe, fairly outlines the machine and the projected voyage. Now it is up to you. Take time to consider it fully. Ask me any questions you wish."

He sat down deliberately in the large, cushioned chair, beside the central table, which was evidently intended for the operator. He stared at me alertly, with calm blue eyes.

I was extremely agitated. My knees had a weak feeling, so that I desired to sit down also; though I was so nervous that I kept striding back and forth across the resilient white fiber of the floor.

Three millions! It would mean so much! Books, magazines, maps—I should have to economize no longer. Years—all my life, if I wished—abroad. The tombs of Egypt. The sand-covered cities of the Gobi. My theory that mankind originated in South Africa. All those puzzles that I had longed to be able to study. Stonehenge! Angkor! Easter Island!

But the adventure seemed madness. A voyage to the moon! In a craft condemned by the very engineers that had built it. To be hurled away from the earth at speeds no man had attained before. To face unknown perils of space. Dangers beyond guessing. Hurtling meteors. The all-penetrating cosmic ray. The burning heat of the sun. The absolute zero. What, beyond speculation and theory, did men know of space? I was no astronomer; how was I to cope with the emergencies that might rise?

"How long will it take?" I demanded suddenly.

My uncle smiled a little. "Glad you are taking it seriously," he said. "The duration of the voyage

depends on the speed you make, of course. A week each way is a conservative estimate. And perhaps two or three days on the moon. To take notes. Photograph it. Move around a little, if possible; land in several different places. There is oxygen and concentrated food to last six months. But a fortnight should see you nearly back. I'll go over the charts and calculations with you."

"Can I leave the machine on the moon?"

"No. No atmosphere. And it would be too hot in the day, too cold at night. Of course an insulated suit and oxygen mask might be devised. Something like diving armor. But I haven't worked at that. You will be expected just to take a few pictures, be prepared to describe what you have seen."

I continued to pace the floor, pausing sometimes to examine some piece of apparatus. How would it feel, I wondered, to be shut up in here? Drifting in space. Far from the world of my birth. Alone. In silence. Entombed. Would it not drive me mad?

My uncle rose suddenly from the chair.

"Sleep on it, Stephen," he advised. "See how you feel in the morning. Or take longer if you wish."

He switched off the light in the machine. Led the way out into the shed. And from it into the brilliant moonlight that flooded the wide, magnificent grounds about the great house that would be one of the prizes of this mad adventure.

As he was locking the shed, I gazed up at the moon.

Broad, bright disk. Silvery, mottled. Extinguishing the stars with argent splendor. And all at once it came over me—the desire to penetrate the enigmatic mystery of this companion world, that men have

watched since the race began.

What an adventure? To be the first human to tread this silver planet. To be the first to solve its age-old riddles. Why think of Angkor, or Stonehenge, of Luxor and Karnak, when I might win the secrets of the moon?

Even if death came, what did it matter against the call of this adventure? Many men would trade their lives eagerly for such a chance.

Suddenly I was strong. All weakness had left me. All fear and doubt. A few moments before I had been tired, wishing to sit down. Now vast energy filled me. I was conscious of an extraordinary elation. Swiftly I turned to my uncle.

"Let's go back," I said. "Show me as much about it as you can tonight. I am going."

He gripped my hand tightly, without a word, before he turned back to the lock.

CHAPTER II

Toward the Moon

It was in the second week, after that sudden decision came to me, that I started. At the end my uncle became a little alarmed, and tried to persuade me to stay longer, to make more elaborate preparations. I believe that he was secretly becoming fond of me, despite his brisk precise manner. I think he took the opinion of his engineers seriously enough to consider

my return very uncertain.

But I could see no reason for longer delay. The operation of the machine was simple; he had explained it quite fully.

There was a switch to close, to send current from the batteries through the coils that raised it to the potential necessary to energize the copper disks. And a large rheostat that controlled the force, from a slight decrease in gravity, to a complete reversal.

The auxiliary apparatus, for control of temperature and atmosphere, was largely automatic. And not beyond my limited mechanical comprehension. I was certain that I should be able to make any necessary repairs or adjustments.

Now I was filled with the greatest haste to undertake the adventure. No doubt or hesitation had troubled me since the moment of the decision. I felt only a longing to be sweeping away from the earth. To view scenes that the ages had kept hidden from human eyes; to tread the world that has always been the symbol of the unattainable.

My uncle recalled one of the engineers, a sallow young fellow named Gorton. On the second morning, to supplement my uncle's instruction he went over the machine again, showing me the function of every part. Before he left, he warned me.

"If you are idiot enough to get in that darned contraption, and turn on the power," he told me, "you'll never come back. Muller said so. And he proved it. So long as the batteries and coil are outside the field of force between the plates, the plates act according to schedule, and rise up in the air.

"But Muller made self-contained models. With the battery and all inside. And they didn't rise up. They went out! Vanished. Just like that!" He snapped his fingers.

"Muller said the things moved along another dimension, right out of our world. And he ought to know. String of degrees a mile long. Into another dimension. No telling what sort of hell you'll blunder into."

I thanked the man. But his warnings only increased my eagerness. I was about to tear aside the veil of the unknown. What if I did blunder into new worlds? Might they not yield rewards of knowledge richer than those of the barren moon? I might be a new Columbus, a greater Balboa.

I slept a few hours in the afternoon, after Gorton had gone. I felt no conscious need of slumber, but my uncle insisted upon it. And to my surprise, I fell soundly asleep, almost as soon as I lay down.

At sunset, we went down again to the shed in which the machine was housed. My uncle started a motor, which opened the roof like a pair of enormous doors, by means of pulleys and cables. The red light of the evening sky streamed down upon the machine.

We made a final inspection of all the apparatus. My uncle explained again the charts and instruments that I was to use in navigating space. Finally he questioned me for an hour, making me explain the various parts of the machine, correcting any error.

I was not to start until nearly midnight.

We returned to the house, where an elaborate dinner was waiting. I ate almost absently, hardly noticing the servants of whom I had been so conscious upon

my arrival. My uncle was full of conversation. Talking of his own life, and asking me many questions about my own, and about my father, whom he had seen last when they were boys. My mind was upon the adventure before me; I could answer him only disjointedly. But I was aware that he had taken a real liking for me; I was not surprised at his request that I postpone the departure.

At last we went back down to the machine. The white moon was high; its soft radiance bathed the gleaming machine, through the opened roof. I stared up at its bright disk. Was it possible that in a short week I should be there, looking back upon the earth? It seemed madness! But the madness of glorious adventure!

Without hesitation, I clambered through the oval door. A last time my uncle wrung my hand. He had tears in his eyes. And his voice was a little husky.

"I want you to come back, Stephen."

I swung the door into its cushioned seat, upon massive hinges, tightened the screws that were to hold it. A final glance about the white-walled interior of the machine. All was in order. The chronometer by the wall, ticking steadily, told me that the moment had come.

My uncle's anxious face was pressed against one of the ports. I smiled at him. Waved. His hand moved across the port. He left the shed.

I dropped into the big chair beside the table, reached for the switch. With my fingers upon the button, I hesitated the merest second. Was there anything else? Anything neglected? Anything I had yet to do on earth? Was I ready to die, if so I must?

The deep, vibrant hum of the coils, beneath the table, answered the pressure of my finger. I took the handle of the rheostat, swung it to the zero mark, where gravitation was to be cut off completely.

My sensation was exactly as if the chair, the floor, had fallen from under me. The same sensation that one feels when an elevator drops very abruptly. Almost I floated out of the chair. I had to grasp at the arm of it to stay within it.

For a few moments I experienced nauseating vertigo. The white crowded room seemed to spin about me. To drop away endlessly beneath me. Sick, helpless, miserable, I clung weakly to the great chair. Falling ... falling ... falling. Would I never strike bottom?

Then I realized, with relief, that the sensation was due merely to the absence of gravity's familiar pull. The machine had worked! My last, lingering doubt was killed. Strange elation filled me.

I was flying away from the earth. Flying.

The thought seemed to work a miracle of change in my feelings. The dreadful, dizzy nausea gave way to a feeling of exhilaration. Of lightness. I was filled with a sense of power and well-being, such as I had never before experienced.

I left the great chair, floated rather than walked to one of the windows.

Already I was high in the air. So high that the moon-lit earth was a dim and misty plain before me. I could see many lights; the westward sky was aglow, above New York. But already I was unable to pick

out the lights at my uncle's mansion.

The machine had risen through the opened roof of the shed. It was driving out into space, as it had been planned to do! The adventure was succeeding.

As I watched, the earth sank visibly. Became a great concave bowl of misty silver. Expanded slowly, as the minutes went by. And became suddenly convex. A huge dark sphere, washed with pale gray light.

Presently, after an hour, when the dials showed that I was beyond the faintest trace of atmosphere, I returned to the table and increased the power, moving the rheostat to the last contact. I looked at charts and chronometer. According to my uncle's calculations, four hours at this acceleration were required, before the controls were set again.

I returned to the window and stared in amazement at the earth, that I had left vast and silver gray and motionless.

It was spinning madly, backward!

The continents seemed to race beneath me—I was now high enough to see a vast section of the globe. Asia. North America. Europe. Asia again. In seconds.

It was madness! The earth spinning in a few moments, instead of the usual twenty-four hours. And turning backward! But I could not doubt my eyes. Even as I watched, the planet seemed to spin faster. Ever faster! The continental outlines merged into dim indistinctness.

I looked away from the mad earth, in bewilderment. The firmament was very black. And the very stars were creeping about it, with visible motions!

Then the sun came into view, plunging across the sky

like a flaming comet. It swung supernally across my field of vision, vanished. Appeared again. And again. Its motion became ever swifter.

What was the meaning of such an apparent revolution of the sun about the sky? It meant, I knew, that earth and moon had swung about the star. That a year had passed! But were years going by as fast as my chronometer ticked off the seconds?

Another strange thing. I could recognize the constellations of the Zodiac, through which the sun was plunging. And it was going backward! As the earth was spinning backward!

I moved to another window, searched for the moon, my goal. It hung still among spinning stars. But in its light there was a flicker, far more rapid than the flashing of the sun across the wild heavens. I wondered, then knew that I saw the waxing and waning of the moon. Months, passing so swiftly that soon the flicker became a gray blur.

The flashing past of the sun became more frequent. Until it was a strange belt of flame about the strange heavens, in which the stars crept and moved like living things.

A universe gone mad! Suns and planets spinning helpless in the might of a cosmic storm! The machine from which I watched the only sane thing in a runaway cosmos!

Then reason came to my rescue.

Earth, moon, sun, and stars could not all be mad. The trouble was with *myself*! My perceptions had changed. The machine—

Slowly it came to me, until I knew I had grasped the truth.

Time, true time, is measured by the movements of the heavenly bodies. Our day is the time of earth's rotation on its axis. Our year the period of its revolution about the sun.

Those intervals had become crowded so thick in my perception that they were indistinguishable. Then countless years were spinning past, while I hung still in space!

Incredible! But the conclusion was inevitable.

And the apparent motion of earth and sun had been backward.

That meant—and the thought was staggering—that the ages were reeling backward. That I was plunging at an incalculable rate into the past.

Vaguely I recalled magazine articles that I had read, upon the nature of space and time. A lecture. The subject had fascinated me, though I had only a layman's knowledge of it.

The lecturer had defined our universe in terms of space-time. A four-dimensional "continuum." Time was a fourth dimension, he had said. An extension as real as the three of what we call space, and not completely distinguishable from them. A direction in which motion would carry one into the past, or into the future.

All memory, he had said, is a groping back along this dimension, at right angles to each of the three of space. Dreams, vivid memories, he insisted, carry one's consciousness in reality back along this dimension, until the body, swept relentlessly along the stream of time, drags it forward again.

Then I recalled what my uncle had told me of the refusal of his engineers to try the machine. Recalled Gorton's warning. Muller, they both had told me, had declared that the machine would move along a fourth dimension, out of our world. He had made models of the machine, and they had vanished when the power was turned on.

Now I knew that Muller was right. His models had vanished because they had been carried into the past. Had not continued to exist in the present time.

And now I was moving along that fourth dimension. The dimension of time. And very swiftly, for the years went past too fast for counting.

The reversal of gravitation, it came to me, must be some effect of this change of direction in time. But I am not a scientist, I can explain the "Conway Effect" no better than my uncle, for all the wonders that it has brought into my life.

At first it was horribly strange and terrifying.

After I had thought out my explanation of the mad antics of the earth and sun and moon, and of the hurrying stars, I was, however, no longer frightened. I gazed out through my small round ports at the melting firmament with some degree of equanimity.

I continued to watch the charts my uncle had prepared, and to make adjustments of the rheostat when they were indicated by the chronometer.

And presently, feeling hungry, I toasted biscuits on the electric stove, cut off a generous slice of a cheese that I found in the supplies, opened a vacuum bottle of steaming chocolate, and made a hearty and very satisfactory meal.

When I had finished, the aspect of the space about

me was unchanged. Crawling stars, already forming themselves into constellations the most of which were unfamiliar. The sun a broad belt of burning gold, counting off the years too swiftly for the eye to follow. A living flame that girdled the firmament. The earth was a huge gray sphere, spinning so swiftly behind me that no detail was visible.

And even the moon, hanging in space ahead, was turning slowly. No longer was the same familiar face toward me, and toward the earth. Already I had reached a point in past time at which the moon was turning on its axis more rapidly than it revolved about the earth. The tidal drag had not yet completely stopped the moon's apparent rotation.

And if already the moon was turning, what would it be when I reached it? Hurtling into the past as I was, would I see oceans cover its dry sea-floors? Would I see an atmosphere soften the harsh outlines of its rugged mountains? Would I see life, vegetation, spread over its plains? Was I to witness the rejuvenation of an aged world?

It seemed fantastic. But it was taking place. The speed of rotation slowly increased as I watched.

The hours slipped past.

I became heavy with sleep. The two days before the departure had not been easy. I had worked day and night to familiarize myself with the machine's operation. The nervous strain had been exhausting. The amazing incidents of the voyage had kept me tense, sapped my strength.

The chart told me that no change was to be made in the controls for many hours. I inspected the gauges which showed the condition of the atmosphere in the chamber. Oxygen content, humidity, temperature,

were correct. The air smelled sweet and clean. I completed the rounds, found everything in order.

I adjusted the big chair to a reclining position, and threw myself upon it. For hours I slept, waking at intervals to make a tour of inspection.

Sometimes, in the following days, I wondered if I should be able to go back. Muller's models had carried no operator, of course to start them on the flight back through time to the starting point. Would I be able to reverse the time-flight? If I followed the directions on the operating chart, on the flight back, would I be flung forward through the ages, back to my own era?

I wondered. But the speculation brought forth no conclusion. A strange, unique experience was mine. Glorious adventure. Death was not too high a price to pay.

It did not even occur to me to attempt to turn back earthward, when I found that I was slipping through time. And I did not have sufficient control of the machine to have done so, had I wished. Dependent upon the chart for navigating instructions, I could not have plotted a return path from the midway point. And I knew no way to stop my flight, except by using the repulsion of the moon's reversed gravitation.

My flight lasted six days, by the chronometer.

Long before the end, the moon was spinning very swiftly. And the edges of its outline had become hazy, so that I knew it had an atmosphere.

I followed the charted directions, until I was in the upper layers of that atmosphere. The moon's surface was sliding very rapidly beneath me, and the

atmosphere with it, due to the swift rotation of the satellite. Consequently, fierce winds screamed about the machine.

I hung in the atmosphere, merely using enough power to balance the moon's comparatively feeble gravitational pull, until the pressure of that rushing wind swept me with it. The mistily indistinct surface slowed, became motionless beneath me.

With power decreased still further, I settled slowly, watching alertly through the ports.

A towering, crimson mountain loomed above the mists below. I dropped toward it, increasing the power a little. At last I hovered motionless above a narrow, irregular plateau, near the peak, that seemed covered with soft scarlet moss.

Slowly I cut down the power. With hardly a shock, the machine settled in the moss.

I was on the moon! The first of my race to set foot upon an alien planet! What adventures might await me?

CHAPTER III

When the Moon Was Young

With the power cut off entirely, I ran to the ports. There had been no time to scan my surroundings during the uncertainties of the landing. Now I peered out eagerly.

The moonscape was as strange a sight as man had ever seen.

The machine had come down in thick green moss, that looked soft as a Persian rug. A foot deep it was. Dark green fibers closely intertwined. In an unbroken carpet it covered the sloping plateau upon which I had landed, and extended almost to the top of the rugged peak to northward.

To the south and west lay a great valley, almost level, miles across. Beyond it rose a dim range of green hills, rugged summits bare and black. A broad river, glinting white in the distance, flowed down the valley, from northwest, into the south. Then there must be an ocean in that direction.

Strange jungle covered that valley, below the green moss of the mountains. Masses of green. Walls of yellow lining the wide smooth river. Dense forests of gigantic plants, weirdly and grotesquely strange. They grew more luxuriant, taller, than similar plants could upon the earth, because a much feebler gravitation opposed their growth.

Equally strange was the sky.

Darker than on earth, perhaps because the atmosphere was thinner. A deep, pure, living blue. A blue that was almost violet. No cloud marred its liquid azure splendor.

The sun hung in the glorious eastward sky. Larger than I had known it. Whiter. A supernal sphere of pure white flame.

Low in the west was an amazing disk. A huge ball of white, a globe of milky light. Many times the diameter of the sun. I wondered at it. And realized that it was—the earth! The earth young as Venus had

been in my time. And like Venus, shrouded in white clouds never broken. Were the rocks still glowing beneath those clouds, I wondered? Or had the life begun—the life of my farthest progenitors?

Would I ever see my native land again, upon that resplendent, cloud-hidden planet? Would the machine carry me back into the future, when I attempted return? Or would it hurl me farther into the past, to plunge flaming into the new-born and incandescent world?

That question I put resolutely from my mind. A new world was before me. A globe strange and unexplored. Why worry about return to the old?

My eyes went back to the broad valley below me, along the banks of the broad river, beneath the majestic range of green mountains. Clumps of gold, resembling distant groves of yellow trees. Patches of green that looked like meadows of grass. Queer, puzzling uprights of black.

I saw things moving. Little bright objects, that rose and fell slightly as they flew. Birds? Gigantic insects? Or creatures stranger than either?

Then I saw the balloons. Captive balloons, floating above the jungles of the valley. At first I saw only two, hanging side by side, swaying a little. Then three more, beyond. Then I distinguished dozens, scores of them, scattered all over the valley.

I strained my eyes at them. Were there intelligent beings here, who had invented the balloons? But what would be the object of hanging them about above the jungles, by the hundred.

I remembered the powerful prism binoculars hanging on the wall beside me. I seized them, focused them

hurriedly. The weird jungle leaped toward me in the lenses.

The things were doubtless balloons. Huge spheres of purple, very bright in the sunlight. Anchored with long red cables. Some of them, I estimated, were thirty feet in diameter. Some, much smaller. I could make out no baskets. But there seemed to be small dark masses upon their lower sides, to which the red ropes were attached.

I left them and surveyed the jungle again.

A mass of the yellow vegetation filled the lenses. A dense tangle of slender yellow stems, armed with terrible rows of long, bayonet-like thorns. A thick tangle of sharp yellow thorns, it seemed, with no more stalk than was necessary to support them against the moon's feeble pull. A wall of cruel spikes, impenetrable.

I found a patch of green. A mass of soft, feathery foliage. A sort of creeper, it seemed, covering rocks, and other vegetation—though it did not mingle with the yellow scrub. Enormous, brilliantly white, bell-shaped blooms were open upon it here and there.

A flying thing darted across my vision. It looked like a gigantic moth, frail wings dusted with silver.

Then I made out a little cluster of curious plants. Black, smooth, upright stalks, devoid of leaf or branch. The tallest looked a foot in diameter, a score in height. It was crowned with a gorgeous red bloom. I noticed that no other vegetation grew near any of them. About each was a little cleared circle. Had they been cultivated?

Hours went by as I stared out through the ports, at this fascinating and bewildering moonscape.

Finally I recalled the pictures that my uncle had requested me to make. For two or three hours I was busy with the cameras. I made exposures in all directions, with ordinary and telescopic lenses. I photographed the scene with color filters. And finally I made motion pictures, swinging the camera to take a panoramic view.

It was almost sunset when I had done. It seemed strange that the day was passing so swiftly, until I looked at the chronometer, found that it was not keeping pace with the sun, and decided that the period of rotation must be rather less than twenty-four hours. I later found it to be about eighteen hours, divided into days and nights of very nearly equal length.

Darkness came very swiftly after sunset, due to the comparatively small size and quick rotation of the moon. The stars burst out splendidly through the clear air, burning in constellations utterly strange.

A heavy dew was soon obscuring the ports. As I later discovered, clouds almost never formed in this light atmosphere. Nearly the entire precipitation was in the form of dew, which, however, was amazingly abundant. The tiny droplets on the glass were soon running in streams.

After a few hours, a huge and glorious snow-white sphere rose in the east. The earth. Wondrous in size and brilliance. The weird jungle was visible in its silvery radiance almost as in daylight.

Suddenly I realized that I was tired, and very sleepy. The anxiety and prolonged nervous strain of the

landing had been exhausting. I threw myself down upon the reclining chair, and fell into immediate oblivion.

The white sun was high when I woke. I found myself refreshed. Keenly hungry. And conscious of a great need for physical exercise. Accustomed to an active life, I had been shut up in that little round room for seven days. I felt that I must move, breathe fresh air.

Could I leave the machine?

My uncle had told me that it would be impossible, because of lack of atmosphere. But there was plainly air about me, on this young moon. Would it be breathable?

I pondered the question. The moon, I knew, was formed of materials thrown off the cooling earth. Then should its atmosphere not contain the same elements as that of earth?

I decided to try it. Open the door slightly, and sniff experimentally. Close it immediately if there seemed anything wrong.

I loosened the screws that held the heavy door, tried to pull it open. It seemed fastened immovably. In vain I tugged at it, looked to see if I had left a screw, or if something was amiss with the hinges. It refused to budge.

For minutes I was baffled. The explanation came to me suddenly. The pressure of the atmosphere outside was much less than that within the machine. Since the door opened inward, it was the unbalanced pressure upon it that held it.

I found the valve which was to be opened to free the chamber of any dangerous excess of oxygen that might escape, and spun it open. The air hissed out

noisily.

I sat down in the chair to wait. At first I felt no symptoms of the lessening pressure. Then I was conscious of a sensation of lightness, of exhilaration. I noticed that I was breathing faster. My temples throbbed. For a few minutes I felt a dull ache in my lungs.

But the sensations did not become unduly alarming, and I left the valve open. The hissing sound gradually decreased, and finally died away completely.

I rose and went to the door, feeling a painful shortness of the breath as I moved. The heavy door came open quite easily now. I sniffed the air outside. It bore a strange, heavy, unfamiliar fragrance which must have been carried from the jungle in the valley. And I found it oddly stimulating—it must have been richer in oxygen than the air in the machine.

With the door flung wide, I breathed deeply of it.

At first I had thought merely of strolling up and down for a while, in the moss outside the machine. But now I decided, quite suddenly, to hike to the lower edge of the green-carpeted plateau, perhaps a mile away, and look at the edge of the jungle.

I looked about for equipment that I should take, got together a few items. A light camera, in case I should see something worth taking. The binoculars. A vacuum bottle full of water, and a little food, so that I should not have to hasten back to eat.

And finally I took down the automatic pistol on the wall, a .45 Colt. It must have been included with the machine's equipment merely as a way of merciful escape, in case some failure made life in the little

round compartment unendurable. There was only one box of ammunition. Fifty cartridges. I loaded the weapon, and slipped the remainder into my pocket.

Gathering up the other articles, I scrambled through the oval door, and stood upon the rim of the lower copper disk, drawing the door to behind me, and fastening it.

And stepped off, upon the moon.

The thick, fibrous moss yielded under my foot, surprisingly. I stumbled, fell into its soft green pile. And in scrambling to my feet, I forgot the lesser gravity of the moon, threw myself into the air, tumbling once more into the yielding moss.

In a few minutes I had mastered the art of walking under the new conditions, so that I could stride along with some confidence, going clear of the ground at every step, as if I had worn seven league boots. Once I essayed a leap. It carried me twenty feet into the air, and twice as far forward. It seemed that I hung in the air an unconscionable time, and floated down very slowly. But I was helpless, aloft, sprawling about, unable to get my feet beneath me. I came down on my shoulder, and must have been painfully bruised had it not been for the thick moss.

I realized that my strength upon the moon was quite out of proportion to my weight. I had muscles developed to handle a mass of 180 pounds. Here my weight was only 30 pounds. It would be some time, I supposed, before I could learn the exact force required to produce the result desired. Actually, I found myself adapted to these new conditions in a surprisingly short space of time.

For a time I was conscious of shortness of the breath, especially after violent exertion. But soon I was accustomed to the lighter air as well as the lesser gravitation.

In half an hour I had arrived at the edge of the red plateau. A steep slope fell before me to the edge of the jungle, perhaps two-thirds of a mile farther below. A slope carpeted with the thick fiber of the green moss.

A weird scene. Clear cerulean sky, darkly, richly blue. Huge white globe of the hot earth setting beyond the farther range of green mountains. The wide valley, with the broad silvery stream, winding among golden forests, and patches of green. The purple balloons floating here and yon, huge spheres swaying on the red cables that anchored them above the jungle.

I seated myself on the moss, where I could overlook that valley of eldritch wonder. I remained there for some time, staring out across it, while I ate most of the food that I had brought, and half-emptied the bottle of water.

Then I decided to descend to the edge of the jungle.

The sun was just at the meridian—the whole of the short afternoon, four hours and a half, was yet before me. I had ample time, I thought, to go down the slope to the edge of the jungle and return before the sudden nightfall.

I had no fear of getting lost. The glittering armor of the machine was visible over the whole plateau. And the jagged, triple peak to the northward of it was a landmark which should be visible over the whole region. There should be no difficulty about return.

Nor, while I realized that the jungle might hide hostile life, did I fear attack. I intended to be cautious, and not to penetrate beyond the edge of the jungle. I had the automatic, which, I was sure, gave me greater power of destruction than any other animal on the planet. Finally in case of difficulty, I could rely upon the superior strength of my muscles, which must be far stronger, in proportion to my weight, than those of native creatures.

I found progress easy on the long, mossy incline. My skill at traveling under lunar conditions of gravity was increasing with practice: I found a way of moving by deliberate, measured leaps, each carrying me twenty feet or more.

In a few minutes I found myself approaching the edge of the jungle. But that was not so sharp a line as it had appeared from above. The first vegetation other than the moss was scattered clumps of a plant resembling the cactus of my native Southwest.

Thick, fleshy disks growing one upon another, edge to edge. They were not green, however, but of a curious pink, flesh-like color. They bore no thorns, but were studded with little black protuberances or knobs, of doubtful function. The plants I first approached were small and appeared stunted. The lower clumps seemed larger, and more thickly spaced.

I paused to examine one. Walked around it curiously. Photographed it from several angles. Then I ventured to touch it with my foot. Several of the little black knobs broke—they proved to be thin-walled vesicles, containing a black liquid. An overpowering and extremely unpleasant odor assailed me, and I retreated hastily.

A hundred yards farther on, I came upon the green creepers. Thick stems coiled like endless serpents over the ground, with innumerable fronds rising from them, terminating in feathery sprays of green. Here and there were huge white blooms, nearly six feet across, resembling great bells of burnished silver. From them, evidently, came the heavy perfume that I had noticed upon opening the door of the machine.

The creepers formed an unbroken mass of green, several feet deep. It would have been impossible to penetrate it without crushing the delicate foliage. I decided to go no farther in that direction. The creeper might have such means of protection as the malodorous sacs of the fleshy plants above. Or dangerous creatures, counterparts of terrene snakes, might lie concealed beneath the dense foliage.

For some distance I followed along the edge of the mass of creepers, pausing at intervals to make photographs. I was approaching a thicket or forest of the yellow scrub. A wall of inch-thick stems, each armed at intervals of a few inches with dagger-like thorns, all interwoven. A hundred feet high, I estimated. Interlaced so closely that a rat would have had difficulty in moving through it, without impaling himself upon a needle-sharp spike.

Then I paused to watch one of the purple balloons, which seemed swaying toward me, increasing the length of the red anchor-cable which held it to the jungle behind. A strange thing, that huge purple sphere, tugging at the thin scarlet cable that held it. Tugging almost like a thing alive, I thought.

Several times I photographed it, but its distance was so great that I feared none of the images would be satisfactory. It seemed to be moving toward me,

perhaps carried by some breeze that did not reach the ground. Perhaps, I thought, it would soon be near enough for a good picture.

CHAPTER IV

The Balloon Menace

I studied it closely, trying to see if it had an intelligent pilot or occupant. But I was unable to settle the point. There was certainly no basket. But black arms or levers seemed to project in a cluster, from its lowest part, to manipulate the cables.

Nearly an hour, I waited, watching it. It moved much closer during that time; until, in fact, it was almost directly overhead, and only a few hundred feet high. The red cable slanted from it back into the jungle. It seemed to be loose, dragging.

At last I got a picture that satisfied me. I decided to go on and examine the tangle of yellow thorn-brush or scrub at closer range.

I had taken my eyes from the purple balloon, and turned to walk away, when it struck.

A red rope whipped about me.

The first I knew, it was already about my shoulders. Its end seemed to be weighted, for it whirled about my body several times, wrapping me in sticky coils.

The cable was about half an inch in diameter and made of many smaller crimson strands, fastened

together with the adhesive stuff that covered it. I recall its appearance very vividly, even the odd, pungent, disagreeable odor of it.

Half a dozen coils of the red cable had whipped about me before I realized that anything was amiss. Then it tightened suddenly, dragging me across the red moss upon which I had been standing. Toward the edge of the jungle.

Looking up in horror, I saw that the rope had been thrown from the purple balloon I had been watching. Now the black arms that I had seen were working swiftly, coiling it up again—with me caught neatly on the end.

The great sphere was drawn down a little, as my weight came upon it. It seemed to swell. Then, having been dragged along until I was directly beneath it, I was lifted clear of the ground.

I was filled with unutterable terror. I was panting, my heart was beating swiftly. And I felt endowed with terrific strength. Furiously I writhed in my gluey bonds, struggled with the strength of desperation to break the red strands.

But the web had been spun to hold just such frightened, struggling animals as myself. It did not break.

Back and forth I swung over the jungle, like a pendulum. With a constantly quickening arc! For the cable was being drawn up. Once more I looked upward, and saw a sight to freeze me in dreadful stupefaction of horror.

The whole balloon was a living thing!

I saw its two black and terrible eyes, aflame with hot evil, staring at me from many bright facets. The

black limbs I had seen were its legs, growing in a cluster at the bottom of its body—now furiously busy coiling up the cable that it had spun, spider-like, to catch me. I saw long jaws waiting, black and hideously fanged, drooling foul saliva. And a rapier-thin pointed snout, that must be meant for piercing, sucking body juices.

The huge purple sphere was a thin-walled, muscular sac, which must have been filled with some light gas, probably hydrogen, generated in the body of the creature. The amazing being floated above the jungle, out of harm's way, riding free on the wind, or anchored with its red web, lassoing its prey and hauling it up to feast hideously in the air.

For a moment I was petrified, dazed and helpless with the new horror of that thin snout, with black-fanged jaws behind it.

Then fear bred superhuman strength in me. I got my arms free, dragging them from beneath the sticky coils. I reached above my head, seized the red cable in both hands, tried to break it between them.

It refused to part, despite my fiercest efforts.

Only then did I recall the pistol in my pocket. If I could reach it in time, I might be able to kill the monster. And the gas should escape through the riddled sac, letting me back to the surface. I was already so high that the fall would have been dangerous, had I succeeded in my desperate effort to break the web.

The viscid stuff on the cable clung to my hands. It took all my strength to tear them loose. But at last they were free, and I fumbled desperately for the gun.

A red strand was across the pocket in which I had the weapon. I tore at it. It required every ounce of my strength to slip it upward. And it adhered to my fingers again. I wrenched them loose, snatched out the automatic. It touched the gluey rope, stuck fast. I dragged it free, moved the safety catch with sticky fingers, raised it above my head.

Though it had been seconds only since I was snatched up, already I had been lifted midway to the dreadful living balloon. I glanced downward. The distance was appalling. I noticed that the balloon was still drifting, so that I hung over a thicket of the yellow scrub.

Then I began shooting at the monster. It was difficult to aim, because of the regular jerks as the ugly black limbs hauled on the cable. I held the gun with both hands and fired deliberately, very carefully.

The first shot seemed to have no effect.

At the second, I heard a shrill, deafening scream. And I saw that one of the black limbs was hanging limp.

I shot at the black, many-faceted eyes. Though I had no knowledge of the creature's anatomy, I supposed that its highest nervous centers should be near them.

The third shot hit one of them. A great blob of transparent jelly burst through the faceted surface, hung pendulous. The thing screamed horribly again. The black arms worked furiously, hauling me up.

I felt a violent upward jerk, stronger than the regular pulls that had been raising me. In a moment I saw

the reason. The creature had released the long anchor-cable, which had held it to the jungle. We were plunging upward. The moon was spinning away below.

The next shot seemed to take no effect. But at the fifth, the black limbs twitched convulsively. I am sure that the creature died almost at once. The limbs ceased to haul upon the cable, hung still. But I fired the two cartridges remaining in the gun.

That was the beginning of a mad aerial voyage.

The balloon shot upward, when the anchor-cable was dropped. And after it was dead, the muscular sac seemed to relax, expand, so that it rose still faster.

Within a few minutes I must have been two miles above the surface. A vast area was visible beneath me; the convexity of the moon's surface, which, of course, is much greater than that of the earth's, was quite apparent.

The great valley lay below, between the green mountain ranges. Splotched with blue and yellow. The white river twisting along it, wide and silvery. I could see into other misty valleys beyond the green ranges, and on the curving horizon were more hills, dim and black in the distance.

The plateau upon which I had landed was like a green-covered table, many thousands of feet below. I could distinguish upon it a tiny bright disk, which I knew was the machine that I had left so unwisely.

Though there had been little wind at the surface, it seemed that I rose into a stratum of air, which was moving quite rapidly into the northwest. I was carried swiftly along; the floor of the great valley glided back beneath me. In a few minutes the

machine was lost to view.

I was, of course, rendered desperate at being swept away from the machine. I kept myself oriented, and tried to watch the landmarks that passed beneath me. It was fortunate, I thought, that the wind was driving me up the valley, instead of across the red ranges. I might be able to return to the machine by following down the great river, until the triple peak, near which I had left the machine, came into view. Despair came over me, however, at the realization that I was not likely to be able to traverse so vast a stretch of the unknown jungles of this world, without my ignorance of its perils leading me into some fatal blunder.

I thought of climbing the web to that monstrous body, and trying to make a great rent in the purple sac, so that I should fall more swiftly. But I could only have succeeded in entangling myself more thoroughly in the adhesive coils. And I dismissed the scheme when I realized that if I fell too rapidly, I might be killed upon striking the surface.

After the first few minutes of the flight, I could see that the balloon was sinking slowly, as the gas escaped through the bullet-holes in the muscular sac. I could only wait, and fix in my mind the route that I must follow back to the machine.

The wind bore me so swiftly along that within an hour the triple peak that I watched had dropped below the curved horizon. But still I was above the great valley, so that I should be able to find my way back by following the river. I wondered if I could build a raft, and float down it, with the current.

The balloon was carried along less rapidly as it approached the surface. But, as I neared the jungle, it

was evident that it still drifted at considerable speed.

Hanging helpless in the end of the red web, I anxiously scanned the jungle into which I was descending. Like that which I had first seen, it was of dense tangles of the thorny yellow scrub, broken with areas covered largely with the luxuriant green creeper.

Never would I be able to extricate myself alive, I knew, if I had the misfortune to fall in the thorn-brush. And another danger occurred to me. Even if I first touched ground in an open space, the balloon, if the wind continued to blow, would drag me into the spiky scrub before I could tear myself free of the web.

Could I cut myself free, within a safe distance of the ground, and let the balloon go on without me? It seemed that only thus could I escape being dragged to death. I knew that I could survive a fall from a considerable height, since the moon's acceleration of gravity is only about two feet per second,—if only I could land on open ground.

But how could I cut the web? I was without a knife. I thought madly of attempting to bite it in two, realized that that would be as hopeless as attempting to bite through a manila rope.

But I still had the pistol. If I should place the muzzle against the cable and fire, the bullet should cut it.

I reached into my pocket again, past the adhesive coil, and found two cartridges. Though they clung to my sticky fingers, I got them at last into the magazine, and worked the action to throw one into the chamber.

By the time I had finished loading, I was low over an

apparently endless jungle of the yellow thorns. Swaying on the end of the web, I was swept along over the spiky scrub, dropping swiftly. At last I could see the edge, and a green patch of the great creepers. For a time I hoped that I would be carried clear of the thorns.

Then they seemed suddenly to leap at me. I threw up my arms, to shelter my face, still clinging fiercely to the pistol.

In an instant, I was being dragged through the cruel yellow spikes. There was a sharp, dry, crackling sound, as they broke beneath my weight. A thousand sharp, poisoned bayonets scratched at me, stabbed, cut.

Intolerable agony racked me. I screamed. The razor-sharp spikes were tipped with poison, so that the slightest scratch burned like liquid flame. And many of the stabbing points went deep.

It seems that I struck near the edge of the thicket. For a moment I hung there in the thorns. Then, as a harder puff of wind struck it, the balloon leaped into the air, dragging me free. I swung up like a pendulum. And down again, beyond the thorny scrub —over a strip of bare sand beside the thicket.

Bleeding rapidly from my cuts, and suffering unendurable pain from the poison in my wounds, I realized that I could not long remain conscious.

Moving in a haze of agony, I seized the red cable with one hand, put the muzzle of the automatic against it, pulled the trigger. The report was crashing, stunning. My right hand, holding the gun,

was flung back by the recoil—I should have lost the weapon had it not been glued to my fingers. The cable was jerked with terrific force, almost breaking my left hand, with which I held it.

And it parted! I plunged downward, sprawled on the sand.

For a few minutes I remained conscious as I lay there on the hard, cold sand—the first soil, I recall thinking vaguely in my agony, that I had seen not covered with vegetation.

The clothing had been half stripped from my tortured body by the thorns. I was bleeding freely from several deeper cuts—I remember how dark the blood was, sinking into the white sand.

All my body throbbed with insufferable pain, from the poison in my wounds. As if I had been plunged into a sea of flame. Only my face had been spared.

Weakly, dizzy with pain, I tried to stagger to my feet. But a coil of the red web still clung about my legs. It tripped me, and I fell forward again, upon the white sand.

Fell into bitter despair. Into blind, hopeless rage at my inane lack of caution in leaving the machine. At my foolhardiness in venturing into the edge of the jungle. Fell into gentle oblivion....

A curious sound drew me back into wakefulness. A thin, high-pitched piping, pleasantly melodious. The musical notes beat insistently upon my brain, evidently originating quite near me.

On first awakening, I was aware of no bodily sensation. My mind was peculiarly dull and slow. I was unable to recall where I was. My first impression was that I was lying in bed in my old rooming place

at Midland and that my alarm clock was ringing. But soon I realized that the liquid piping notes that had disturbed me came from no alarm.

I forced open heavy eyes. What startling nightmare was this? A tangle of green creepers, incredibly profuse. A wall of yellow thorns. A scarlet mountain beyond. And purple balloons floating in a rich blue sky.

I tried to sit up. My body burst into screaming agony when I moved. And I sank back. My skin was stiff with dry blood. The deeper wounds were aching. And the poison from the thorns seemed to have stiffened my muscles, so that the slightest motion brought exquisite pain.

The melodious pipings had been abruptly silenced at my movement. But now they rose again. Behind me. I tried to turn my head.

Recollection was returning swiftly. My uncle's telegram. The flight through space and time. My expedition to the jungle's edge, and its horrible sequel. I still lay where I had fallen, on the bare sand below the spiky scrub.

I groaned despite myself, with the pain of my stiff body. The thin musical notes stopped again. And the thing that had voiced them glided around before me, so that I could see it.

A strange and wonderful being.

Its body was slender, flexible as an eel. Perhaps five feet long, it was little thicker than my upper arm. Soft, short golden down or fur covered it. Part of it was coiled on the sand; its head was lifted two or three feet.

A small head, not much larger than my fist. A tiny

mouth, with curved lips full and red as a woman's. And large eyes, dark and intelligent. They were deeply violet, almost luminous. Somehow they looked human, perhaps only because they mirrored the human qualities of curiosity and pity.

Aside from red mouth and dark eyes, the head had no human features. Golden down covered it. On the crown was a plume or crest of brilliant blue. But strange as it was, it possessed a certain beauty. A beauty of exquisite proportion, of smooth curves.

Curious wing-like appendages or mantles grew from the sides of the sleek, golden body, just below the head. Now they were stiffened, extended as if for flight. They were very white, of thin soft membrane. Their snowy surfaces were finely veined with scarlet.

Other than these white, membranous mantles, the creature had no limbs. Slim, long, pliant body, covered with golden fur. Small, delicate head, with red mouth and warm dark eyes, crested with blue. And delicate wings thrust out from its sides.

I stared at it.

Even at first sight, I did not fear it, though I was helpless. It seemed to have a magnetic power that filled me with quiet confidence, assured me that it meant only good.

The lips pursed themselves. And the thin, musical piping sound came from them again. Was the thing speaking to me? I uttered the first phrases that entered my mind, "Hello. Who are we, anyhow?"

CHAPTER V

The Mother

The thing glided toward me swiftly, its smooth round golden body leaving a little twisting track in the white sand. It lowered its head a little. And it laid one of the white mantles across my forehead.

The strange red-veined membrane was soft, yet there was an odd firmness in its pressure against my skin. A vital warmth seemed to come from it—it was vibrant with energy, with life.

The pipings came again. And they seemed to stir vague response in my mind, to call dim thoughts into being. As the same sounds were repeated again and again, definite questions formed in my mind.

"What are you? How did you come here?"

Through some strange telepathy induced by the pressure of the mantle upon my head, I was grasping the thought in the piping words.

It was a little time before I was sufficiently recovered from my astonishment to speak. Then I replied slowly, phrasing my expressions carefully, and uttering them as distinctly as I could.

"I am a native of Earth. Of the great white globe you can see in the sky. I came here on a machine which moves through space and time. I left it, and was caught and jerked up into the air by one of those purple, floating things. I broke the web, and fell here. My body was so torn by the thorns that I cannot move."

The thing piped again. A single quavering note. It was repeated until its meaning formed in my mind.

"I understand."

"Who are you?" I ventured.

I got the meaning of the reply, as it was being piped for the third time. "I am the Mother. The Eternal Ones, who destroyed my people, pursue me. To escape them, I am going to the sea."

And the thin, musical tones came again. This time I understood them more easily.

"Your body seems slow to heal its hurts. Your mental force is feeble. May I aid you?"

"Of course," I said. "Anything you can do—"

"Lie still. Trust me. Do not resist. You must sleep." When the meaning of the notes came to me, I relaxed upon the sand, closed my eyes.

I could feel the warm, vibrant pressure of the mantle on my forehead. Vital, throbbing force seemed pulsing into me through it. I felt no fear, despite the strangeness of my situation. A living wave of confidence came over me. Serene trust in the power of this being. I felt a command to sleep. I did not resist it; a strong tide of vital energy swept me into oblivion.

It seemed but an instant later, though it must have been many hours, when an insistent voice called me back from sleep.

Vitality filled me. Even before I opened my eyes, I was conscious of a new and abounding physical vigor, of perfect health; I was bubbling with energy and high spirits. And I knew, by the complete absence of bodily pain, that my wounds were completely healed.

I opened my lids, saw the amazing creature that had

called itself the Mother. Its smooth golden body coiled beside me on the sand. Its large, clear eyes watching me intently, with kind sympathy.

Abruptly I sat up. My limbs were stiff no longer. My body was still caked with dried blood, clothed in my tattered garments; the sticky scarlet coils of the web were still around me. But my ragged wounds were closed. Only white scars showed where they had been.

"Why, I'm well!" I told the Mother, thankfully. "How'd you do it?"

The strange being piped melodiously, and I grasped the meaning almost at once. "My vital force is stronger than your own. I merely lent you energy."

I began tearing at the coils of the crimson web about me. Their viscid covering seemed to have dried a little; otherwise I might never have got them off. After a moment the Mother glided forward and helped.

It used the white, membranous appendages like hands. Though they appeared quite frail, they seemed able to grasp the red cable powerfully when they were folded about it.

In a few minutes I was on my feet.

Again the Mother piped at me. I failed to understand, though vague images were summoned to my mind. I knelt down again on the sand, and the being glided toward me, pressed the white, red-veined mantle once more against my forehead. An amazing organ, that mantle, so delicately beautiful. So strong of grasp when used as a hand. And useful, as I was to learn, as an organ of some strange sense.

The meaning of the pipings came to me clearly now,

with the warm, vibrant mantle touching my head.

"Adventurer, tell me more of your world, and how you came here. My people are old, and I have vital powers beyond your own. But we have never been able to go beyond the atmosphere of our planet. Even the Eternal Ones, with all their machines, have never been able to bridge the gulf of space. And it has been thought that the primary planet from which you say you came is yet too hot for the development of life."

For many hours we talked, I in my natural voice, the Mother in those weirdly melodious pipings. At first the transference of thought by the telepathy which the wonderful mantle made possible was slow and awkward. I, especially, had trouble in receiving, and had many times to ask the Mother to repeat a complex thought. But facility increased with practice, and I at last was able to understand, quite readily, even when the white membrane did not touch me.

The sun had been low when I woke. It set, and the dew fell upon us. We talked on in the darkness. And the earth rose, illuminating the jungle with argent glory. Still we talked, until it was day again. For a time the air was quite cold. Wet with the abundant dew, I felt chilled, and shivered.

But the Mother touched me again with the white membrane. Quick, throbbing warmth seemed to flow from it into my body, and I felt cold no longer.

I told much of the world that I had left, and of my own insignificant life upon it. Told of the machine.

Of the voyage across space, and back through æons of time, to this young moon.

And the Mother told me of her life, and of her lost people.

She had been the leader of a community of beings that had lived on the highlands, near the source of the great river that I had seen. A community in some respects resembling those of ants or bees upon the earth. It had contained thousands of neuter beings, imperfectly developed females, workers. And herself, the only member capable of reproduction. She was now the sole survivor of that community.

It seemed that her race was very old, and had developed a high civilization. The Mother admitted that her people had had no machines or buildings of any kind. She declared that such things were marks of barbarism, and that her own culture was superior to mine.

"Once we had machines," she told me. "My ancient mothers lived in shells of metal and wood, such as you describe. And constructed machines to aid and protect their weak and inefficient bodies.

"But the machines tended to weaken their poor bodies still further. Their limbs atrophied, perished from lack of use. Even their brains were injured, for they lived an easy life, depending upon machines for existence, facing no new problems.

"Some of my people awoke to the danger. They left the cities, and returned to the forest and the sea, to live sternly, to depend upon their own minds and their own bodies, to remain living things, and not grow into cold machines.

"The mothers divided. And my people were those

that returned to the forest."

"And what," I asked, "of those that remained in the city, that kept the machines?"

"They became the Eternal Ones—my enemies.

"Generation upon generation their bodies wasted away. Until they were no longer natural animals. They became mere brains, with eyes and feeble tentacles. In place of bodies, they use machines. Living brains, with bodies of metal.

"Too weak, they became, to reproduce their kind. So they sought immortality, with their mechanical science. And still some of them live on, in their ugly city of metal—though for ages no young have been born among them. The Eternal Ones.

"But at last they die, because that is the way of life. Even with all their knowledge they cannot live forever. One by one, they fall. Their strange machines are still, with rotting brains in their cases.

"And the few thousands that live attacked my people. They planned to take the Mothers. To change their offspring with their hideous arts, and make of them new brains for the machines.

"The Mothers were many, when the war began. And my people a thousand times more. Now only I remain. But it was no easy victory for the Eternal Ones. My people fought bravely. Many an ancient brain they killed. But the Eternal Ones had great engines of war, that we could not escape, nor destroy with our vital energy.

"All the Mothers save myself were taken. And all destroyed themselves, rather than have their children made into living machines.

"I alone escaped. Because my people sacrificed their lives for me. In my body are the seed of a new race. I seek a home for my children. I have left our old land on the shores of the lake, and I am going down to the sea. There we shall be far from the Eternal Land. And perhaps our enemies will never find us.

"But the Eternal Ones know I have escaped. They are hunting me. Hunting me with their strange machines."

When day came, I felt very hungry. What was I to do for food in this weird jungle? Even if I could find fruits or nuts, how could I tell whether they were poisonous? I mentioned my hunger.

"Come," the Mother piped.

She glided away across the white sand, with easy, sinuous grace. Very beautiful, she was. Slim body, smooth, rounded. Compactly trim. The golden down was bright in the sunlight; sapphire rays played over the blue plume upon her head. The wondrous, red-veined mantles at her sides shone brilliantly.

Regarding her strange beauty, I stood still for a moment, and then moved after her slowly, absently.

She turned back suddenly, with something like humor flashing in her great dark violet eyes.

"Is your great body so slow you cannot keep up with me?" she piped, almost derisively. "Shall I carry you?" Her eyes were mocking.

For answer I crouched, leaped into the air. My wild spring carried me a score of feet above her, and beyond. I had the misfortune to come down head

first upon the sand, though I received no injury.

I saw laughter in her eyes, as she glided swiftly to me, and grasped my arm with one of the white mantles to assist me to my feet.

"You could travel splendidly if there were two of you, one to help the other out of the thorns," she said quaintly.

A little embarrassed by her mockery, I followed meekly.

We reached a mass of the green creeper. Without hesitation, she pushed on through the feathery foliage. I broke through behind her. She led the way to one of the huge white flowers, bent it toward her, and crept into it like a golden bee.

In a moment she emerged with mantles cupped up to hold a good quantity of white, crystalline powder which she had scraped from the inside of the huge calyx.

She made me hold my hands, and dropped part of the powder into them. She lifted what she had left, upon the other mantle, and began delicately licking at it with her lips.

I tasted it. It was sweet, with a peculiar, though not at all unpleasant, acid flavor. It formed a sort of gum as it was wetted in my mouth, and this softened and dissolved as I continued to chew. I took a larger bite, and soon finished all the Mother had given me. We visited another bloom. This time I reached in, and scraped out the powder with my own hand. (The crystals must have been formed for the same purpose as the nectar in terrene flowers—to attract raiders, which carry the pollen.)

I divided my booty with the Mother. She accepted

but little, and I found enough of the sweetish powder in the calyx to satisfy my own hunger.

"Now I must go on down to the sea," she piped. "Too long already have I delayed with you. For I carry the seed of my race; I must not neglect the great work that has fallen upon me.

"But I was glad to know of your strange planet. And it is good to be with an intelligent being again, when I had been so long alone. I wish I could stay longer with you. But my wishes are not my master."

Thoughts of parting from her were oddly disturbing. My feeling for her was partly gratitude for saving my life and partly something else. A sense of comradeship. We were companion adventurers in this weird and lonely jungle. Solitude and my human desire for society of any sort drew me toward her.

Then came an idea. She was going down the valley to the sea. And my way led in the same direction, until I could see the triple peak that marked the location of the machine.

"May I travel with you," I asked her, "until we reach the mountain where I left the machine in which I came to your world?"

The Mother looked at me with fine dark eyes. And glided suddenly nearer. A white membranous mantle folded about my hand, with warm pressure.

"I am glad you wish to go with me," she piped. "But you must think of the danger. Remember that I am hunted by the Eternal Ones. They will doubtless destroy you if they find us together."

"I have a weapon," I said. "I'll put up a scrap for you, if we get in a tight place. And besides, I'd very likely be killed, in one way or another, if I tried to travel

alone."

"Let us go, Adventurer."

Thus it was decided.

I had dropped the camera, the binoculars, and the vacuum bottle when the balloon-creature jerked me into the air. They were lost in the jungle. But I still had the automatic. It had remained in my hand—stuck to it, in fact—when I fell upon the sand. I carried it with me.

The Mother objected to the weapon. Because it was a machine, and machines weakened all that used them. But I insisted that we should have to fight machines, if the Eternal Ones caught us, and that fire could be best fought with fire. She yielded gracefully.

"But my vital force will prove stronger than your rude slaying machine, Adventurer," she maintained.

We set out almost immediately. She glided off along the strip of bare sand beside the wall of thorny yellow scrub. And began my instruction in the ways of life upon the moon, by informing me that there was always such a clear zone about a thicket of the thorn-brush, because its roots generated a poison in the soil which prevented the growth of other vegetation near them.

When we had traveled two or three miles, we came to a crystal pool, where the abundant dew had collected at the bottom of a bare, rocky slope. We drank there. Then the Mother plunged into it joyously. With white mantles folded tight against her sides, she flashed through the water like a golden eel. I was glad to remove my own garments, and wash the grime and dried blood from my body.

I was donning my tattered clothing again, and the

Mother was lying beside me, at the edge of the pool, with eyes closed, drying her golden fur in the sunshine, when I saw the ghostly bars.

Seven thin upright pillars of light, ringed about us. Straight bars of pale white radiance. They stood like phantom columns about us, inclosing a space ten yards across. They were not above two inches in diameter. And they were quite transparent, so I could see the green jungle and the yellow wall of thorn-brush quite plainly through them.

I was not particularly alarmed. In fact, I thought the ghostly pillars only some trick of my vision. I rubbed my eyes, and said rather carelessly to the Mother:

"Are the spirits building a fence around us? Or is it just my eyes?"

She lifted her golden, blue-crested head quickly. Her violet eyes went wide. I saw alarm in them. Terror. And she moved with astonishing speed. Drew her slender length into a coil. Leaped. And seized my shoulder as she leaped, with one of her mantles.

She jerked me between two of those strange columns of motionless light, out of the area they enclosed.

I fell on the sand, got quickly to my feet.

"What—" I began.

"The Eternal Ones," her sweet, whistling tones came swiftly. "They have found me. Even here, they reach me with their evil power. We must go on, quickly."

She glided swiftly away. Still buttoning my clothing, I followed, keeping pace with her easily, with my regular leaps of half a dozen yards. Followed, wondering vainly what danger there might have been in the pillars of ghostly light.

CHAPTER VI

Pursuit!

We skirted a continuous wall of the spiky yellow scrub.

The strip of clear ground we followed was usually fifty to one hundred yards wide. The mass of yellow thorn-brush, the poison from whose roots had killed the vegetation here, rose dense and impenetrable to our right. To the left of our open way limitless stretches covered with the green creeper. Undulating seas of feathery emerald foliage. Scattered with huge white blooms. Broken, here and there, with strange plants of various kinds. Beyond were other clumps of the yellow scrub. A red mountain wall rose in the distance. Huge purple balloons swayed here and there upon this weird, sunlit moonscape, anchored with their red cables.

I suppose we followed that open strip for ten miles. I was beginning to breathe heavily, as violent exercise always made me do in the moon's light atmosphere. The Mother showed no fatigue.

Abruptly she paused ahead of me, and glided into a sort of tunnel through the forest of thorns. A passage five feet wide and six feet high, with the yellow spokes arching over it. The floor was worn smooth, hard-packed as if by constant use. It seemed almost perfectly straight, for I could see down it for a considerable distance. Twilight filled it, filtering down through the unbroken mass of cruel bayonets above.

"I am not eager to use this path," the Mother told me. "For they who made it are hostile things. And though

not very intelligent, they are able to resist my vital force, so that I cannot control them. We shall be helpless if they discover us.

"But there is no other way. We must cross this forest of thorns. And I am glad to be out of sight in this tunnel. Perhaps the Eternal Ones will lose us again. We must hasten, and hope that we encounter no rightful user of the path. If one appears, we must hide."

I was placed immediately at a disadvantage upon entering the tunnel, for I could no longer take the long leaps by which I had been traveling. My pace became a sort of trot. I had to hold my head down, to save it from the poisoned thorns above.

The Mother glided easily before me, to my relief not in such haste as before. Slender and strong and trimly beautiful—for all her strangeness. I was glad she had let me come with her. Even if peril threatened.

I found breath for speech.

"Those ghostly bars," I panted. "What were they?"

"The Eternal Ones possess strange powers of science," came the thin, whistling notes of her reply. "Something like the television you told me of. But more highly developed. They were able to see us back by the pool.

"And the shining bars were projected through space by their rays of force. They meant some harm to us. Just what, I do not know. It is apparently a new weapon, which they did not use in the war."

We must have gone many miles through the tunnel. It had been almost perfectly straight. There had been no branches or cross-passages. We had come through

no open space. Roof and walls of yellow thorns had been unbroken. I was wondering what sort of creature it might be, that had made a path through the thorns so long and straight.

The Mother stopped suddenly, turned back to face me.

"One of the makers of the trail is approaching," she piped. "I feel it coming. Wait for me a bit."

She sank in golden coils upon the trail. Her head was raised a little. The mantles were extended stiffly. Always before they had been white, except for their fine veining of red. But now soft, rosy colors flushed them. Her full red lips were parted a little, and her eyes had become strange, wide, staring. They seemed to look past me, to gaze upon scenes far-off, invisible to ordinary sight.

For long seconds she remained motionless, violet eyes distant, staring.

Then she stirred abruptly. Rose upon tawny, golden coils. Alarm was in her great eyes, in her thin, melodious tones.

"The creature comes behind us. Upon this trail. We have scant time to reach the open. We must go swiftly."

She waited for me to begin my stumbling run, glided easily beside me. I moved awkwardly. With only the moon's slight gravitational pull to hold me to the trail, I was in constant danger from the thorns.

For tortured hours, it seemed to me, we raced down the straight passage, through the unbroken forest of yellow thorns. My heart was laboring painfully; my breath came in short gasps of agony. My body was not equipped for such prolonged exertions in the

light air.

The Mother, just ahead of me, glided along with effortless ease. I knew that she could easily have left me, had she wished.

At last I stumbled, fell headlong, and did not have energy to get at once to my feet. My lungs burned, my heart was a great ache. Sweat was pouring from me; my temples throbbed; and a red mist obscured my sight.

"Go—on," I gasped, between panting breaths. "I'll try —to stop—it."

I fumbled weakly for my gun.

The Mother stopped, came back to me. Her piping notes were quick, insistent. "Come. We are near the open now. And the thing is close. You must come!"

With a soft, flexible mantle she seized my arm. It seemed to me that a wave of new strength and energy came into me from it. At any rate, I staggered to my feet, lurched forward again. As I rose, I cast a glance backward.

A dark, indistinguishable shape was in view. So large that it filled almost the whole width of the tunnel. A dim circle of the pale light of the thorn forest showed around it.

I ran on ... on ... on.

My legs rose and fell, rose and fell, like the insensate levers of an automaton. I felt no sensation from them. Even my lungs had ceased to burn, since the Mother touched me. And my heart ached no longer.

It seemed that I floated beside my body, and watched it run, run, run with the monotonously repeated movements of a machine.

My eyes were upon the Mother before me.

Gliding so swiftly through the twilight of the tunnel. Trim, round golden body. White mantles extended stiffly, wing-like, as if to help carry her. Delicate head raised, the blue plume upon it flashing.

I watched that blue plume as I ran. It danced mockingly before me, always retreating. Always just beyond my grasp. I followed it through the blinding mists of fatigue, when all the rest of the world melted into a gray blue, streaked with bloody crimson.

I was astonished when we came out into the sunlight. A strip of sand below the yellow wall of thorns. Cool green foliage beyond, a sea of green. Sinister purple balloons above it, straining on crimson cables. Far-off, a scarlet line of mountains, steep and rugged.

The Mother turned to the left.

I followed, automatically, mechanically. I was beyond feeling. I could see the bright moonscape, but it was strange no longer. Even the threat of the purple balloons was remote, without consequence.

I do not know how far we ran, beside the forest of thorns, before the Mother turned again and led the way into a mass of creepers.

"Lie still," she piped. "The creature may not find us."

Gratefully, I flung myself down in the delicate fronds. I lay flat, with my eyes closed, my breath coming in great, painful, sobbing gasps. The Mother

folded my hand in her soft mantle again, and immediately, it seemed, I felt relief, though I still breathed heavily.

"Your reserve of vital energy is very low," she commented.

I took the automatic from my pocket, examined it to see that it was ready for action. I had cleaned and loaded it before we started. I saw the Mother raising her blue-crested head cautiously. I got to my knees, peered back along the bare strip of sand, down which we had come.

I saw the thing advancing swiftly along the sand.

A sphere of bright crimson. Nearly five feet in diameter. It rolled along, following the way we had come.

"It has found us!" the Mother piped, very softly. "And my vital power cannot reach through its armor. It will suck the fluids from our bodies."

I looked down at her. She had drawn her slender body into a golden coil. Her head rose in the center, and the mantles were outspread, pure white, veined with fine lines of scarlet, and frail as the petals of a lily. Her great dark eyes were grave and calm; there was no trace of panic in them.

I raised the automatic, determined to show no more fear than she, and to give my best to save her.

Now the scarlet globe was no more than fifty yards away. I could distinguish the individual scales of its armor, looking like plates of horn covered with ruby lacquer. No limbs or external appendages were visible then. But I saw dark ovals upon the shell, appearing at the top and seeming to drop down, as the thing rolled.

I began shooting.

At such a distance there was no possibility of missing. I knelt in the leaves of the green creeper, and emptied the magazine into the globe.

It continued to roll on toward us, without change of speed. But a deep, angry drumming sound came from within it. A reverberating roar of astonishing volume. After a few moments, I heard it repeated from several points about us. Low and distant rumblings, almost like thunder.

In desperate haste, I was filling the clip with fresh cartridges. Before I could snap it back into the gun, the creature was upon us.

Until it stopped, it had presented a sphere of unbroken surface. But suddenly six long, glistening black tentacles reached out of it, one from each of the black ovals I had seen evenly spaced about the red shell. They were a dozen feet long, slender, covered with thin black skin corrugated with innumerable wrinkles, and glistening with tiny drops of moisture. At the base of each was a single, staring, black-lidded eye.

One of those black tentacles was thrust toward me. It reeked with an overpowering, fetid odor. At its extremity was a sharp, hooked claw, beside a black opening. I think the creature sucked its food through those hideous, retractable tentacles.

I got the loaded clip into the gun, hastily snapped a cartridge into the chamber. Shrinking back from the writhing tentacular arm, I fired seven shots, as rapidly as I could press the trigger, into the black-lidded eye.

The deep drumming notes came from within the red

shell again. The black tentacles writhed, thrashed about, and became suddenly stiff and rigid. The sound of it died to a curious rattle, and then ceased.

"You have killed it," the Mother whistled musically. "You use your machine well, and it is more powerful than I thought. Perhaps, after all, we may yet live."

As if in ominous answer, a reverberating roll of distant drumming came from the tangle of yellow thorns. She listened, and the white mantles were stiffened in her alarm.

"But it has called to its kind. Soon many will be here. We must hasten away."

Though I was still so tired that movement was torture, I rose and followed the Mother, as she glided on along the sand.

Only a moment did I pause to examine the very interesting creature I had killed. It seemed unique, both in shape and in means of locomotion. It must have developed the spherical shell of red armor through ages of life in the spiky scrub. By drawing its limbs inside, it was able to crash through the thorns without suffering any hurt. I supposed it contrived to roll along by some rhythmic muscular contraction, inside the shell—such movement being much easier on the moon than it would be on earth, because of the lesser gravity. Where it could not roll, it dragged or lifted itself with the long, muscular appendages that I have called tentacles.

Since we were in the open air again, I was able to resume my progression by deliberate, measured leaps, which carried me forward as fast as the

Mother could move, and with much less effort than I had spent in running. I had a few moments of rest as I glided through the air between leaps, which compensated for the fiercer effort of each spring.

From time to time I looked back, nervously. At first I could see only the scarlet shell of the dead creature, there by the green vines where we had killed it. Always smaller, until it was hardly visible.

Then I saw other spheres. Emerging from the tangle of yellow thorn-brush. Rolling along the strip of bare soil, to congregate about the dead being. Finally I saw that they had started in our direction, rolling along rather faster than we could move.

"They are coming," I told the Mother. "And more of them than I can kill."

"They are implacable," came her piping reply. "When one of them sets out upon the trail of some luckless creature, it never stops until it has sucked the body fluids from it—or until it is dead."

"Anything we can do?" I questioned.

"There is a rock ahead of us, beyond that thicket. A small hill, whose sides are so steep they will not be able to climb it. If we can reach it in time, we may be able to scramble to the top.

"It will be only temporary escape, since the creatures will never leave so long as we are alive upon it. But we shall delay our fate, at least—if we can reach it in time."

Again I looked back. Our pursuers were rolling along like a group of red marbles, at the edge of the yellow forest. Gaining upon us—swiftly.

The Mother glided along more rapidly. The white

mantles were stiffly extended from her golden sides, and aglow with rosy colors. The muscles beneath her furry skin rippled evenly, gracefully.

I increased the force of my own leaps.

We rounded an arm of the tangle of scrub, came in sight of the rock. A jutting mass of black granite. Its sides leaped up steep and bare from a mass of green creepers. Green moss crowned it. Thirty feet high it was. Perhaps a hundred in length.

Our pursuers were no longer merely marbles when we saw the rock. They had grown to the size of baseballs. Rolling swiftly after us.

The Mother glided on, a tireless strength in her graceful tawny body. And I leaped desperately, straining to drive myself as fast as possible.

We turned. Broke through the thick masses of verdure to the rock. Stood beneath its sheer wall, grim and black.

The red spheres were no more than a hundred yards behind. A sudden rumble of drums came from them, when we halted by the rock. I could see the dark ovals on their glistening red armor, that marked their eyes and the ends of their concealed tentacles.

"I can never climb that," the Mother was piping.

"I can leap up!" I cried. "Earth muscles. I'll carry you up."

"Better that one should live than both of us die," she said. "I can delay them, until you reach the top."

She started gliding back, toward the swiftly rolling spheres.

I bent, snatched her up.

It was the first time that I had felt her body. The golden fur was short, and very soft. The rounded body beneath it was firm, muscular, warm and vibrant. It throbbed with life. I felt that a strange sudden surge of energy was coming into me from contact with it.

I threw her quickly over my shoulder, ran forward a few steps, leaped desperately up at that sheer wall of black granite.

My own weight, on the moon, was only thirty pounds. The Mother, compact and strong though she was, weighed no more than a third as much. Combined, our weight was then some forty pounds. But, as she had realized, it was an apparently hopeless undertaking to attempt to hurl that mass to the top of the cliff before us.

At first I thought I should make it, as we soared swiftly up and up, toward the crown of red moss. Then I realized that we should strike the face of the cliff before we reached the top.

The face of the black rock was sheer. But my searching eyes caught a little projecting ledge. As we fell against the vertical cliff, my fingers caught that ledge. A moment of dreadful uncertainty, for the ledge was mossy, slippery.

CHAPTER VII

The Eternal Ones Follow!

My left hand slipped suddenly off. But the right held. I drew myself upward. The Mother slipped from my shoulder to the top of the rock. Grasped my left hand with one of the white mantles, drew me to safety.

Trembling from the strain of it, I got to my feet upon the soft scarlet moss, and surveyed our fortress. The moss-covered surface was almost level, a score of feet wide at the middle, where we stood, and a hundred in length. On all sides the walls were steep, though not everywhere so steep as where I had leaped up.

"Thank you, Adventurer," the Mother whistled musically. "You have saved my life, and the lives of all my people to come."

"I was merely repaying a debt," I told her.

We watched the red globes. Very soon they reached the foot of the cliff. The rumble of drums floated up from the group of them. And they scattered, surrounding the butte.

Presently we discovered that they were attempting to climb up. They were not strong enough to make the leap as I had done. But they were finding fissures and ledges upon which their long tentacles could find a grasp, drawing themselves up.

We patrolled the sides of the rock regularly, and I shot those which seemed to be making the best progress. I was able to aim carefully at an eye or the base of a tentacle. And usually a single shot was enough to send the climber rolling back down to the green jungle.

The view from our stronghold was magnificent. On one side was an endless wall of yellow scrub, with crimson mountains towering above it in the distance.

On the other, the green tangle of the luxuriant creepers swept down to the wide silver river. Yellow and green mottled the slope that stretched up to scarlet hills beyond.

We held out for an entire day.

The sun sank beyond the red mountains when we had been upon the butte only an hour or two. A dark night would have terminated our adventures on the spot. But fortunately the huge white disk of the earth rose almost immediately after sunset, and gave sufficient light throughout the night to enable us to see the spheres that persisted in attempting to climb the walls of our fort.

It was late on the following afternoon that I used my last shot. I turned to the Mother with the news that I could no longer keep the red spheres from the walls, that they would soon be overwhelming us.

"It does not matter," she piped. "The Eternal Ones have found us again."

Looking nervously about, I saw the bars of ghostly light once more. Seven thin upright pillars of silvery radiance, standing in a ring about us. They had exactly the same appearance as those from which we had fled at the pool.

"I have felt them watching for some time," she said. "Before, we escaped by running away. Now that is impossible."

Calmly she coiled her tawny length. The white mantles were folded against her golden fur. Her small head sank upon her coils, blue crest erect above it. Her violet eyes were grave, calm, alert. They reflected neither fear nor despair.

The seven pillars of light about us became

continually brighter.

One of the red spheres, with black tentacles extended, dragged itself upon the top of the butte, with us. The Mother saw it, but paid it no heed. It was outside the ring formed by the seven pillars. I stood still, within that ring, beside the Mother, watching—waiting.

The seven columns of light grew brighter.

Then it seemed that they were no longer merely light, but solid metal.

At the same instant, I was blinded with a flash of light, intolerably bright. A splintering crash of sound smote my ears, sharp as the crack of a rifle, infinitely louder. A wave of pain flashed over my body, as if I had received a severe electric shock. I had a sense of abrupt movement, as if the rock beneath my feet had been jarred by a moonquake.

Then we were no longer upon the rock.

I was standing upon a broad, smooth metal plate. About its edge rose seven metal rods, shining with a white light, their positions corresponding exactly to the seven ghostly pillars. The Mother was coiled on the metal plate beside me, her violet eyes still cool and quiet, revealing no surprise.

But I was dazed with astonishment.

For we were no longer in the jungle. The metal plate upon which I stood was part of a complex mechanism, of bars and coils of shining wire, and huge tubes of transparent crystal, which stood in the center of a broad open court, paved with bright, worn metal.

About the court towered buildings. Lofty, rectangular

edifices of metal and transparent crystal. They were not beautiful structures. Nor were they in good repair. The metal was covered with ugly red oxide. Many of the crystal panels were shattered.

Along the metal-paved streets, and on the wide courtyard about us, things were moving. Not human beings. Not evidently, living things at all. But grotesque things of metal. Machines. They had no common standard of form; few seemed to resemble any others. They had apparently been designed with a variety of shapes, to fill a variety of purposes. But many had a semblance to living things that was horrible mockery.

"This is the land of the Eternal Ones," the Mother piped to me softly. "These are the beings that destroyed my people, seeking new brains for their worn-out machines."

"But how did we get here?" I demanded.

"Evidently they have developed means of transmitting matter through space. A mere technical question. Resolving matter into energy, transmitting the energy without loss on a light beam, condensing it again into the original atoms.

"It is not remarkable that the Eternal Ones can do such things. When they gave up all that is life, for such power. When they sacrificed their bodies for machines. Should they not have some reward?"

"It seems impossible—"

"It must, to you. The science of your world is young. If you have television after a few hundred years,

what will you not have developed after a hundred thousand?

"Even to the Eternal Ones, it is new. It is only in the time of my own life that they have been able to transmit objects between two stations, without destroying their identity. And they have never before used this apparatus, with carrier rays that could reach out to disintegrate our bodies upon the rock, and create a reflecting zone of interference that would focus the beam here—"

Her piping notes broke off sharply. Three grotesque machines were advancing upon us, about the platform. Queer bright cases, with levels and wheels projecting from them. Jointed metal limbs. Upon the top of each was a transparent crystal dome, containing a strange, shapeless gray mass. A soft helpless gray thing, with huge black staring eyes. The brain in the machine! The Eternal One.

Horrible travesties of life, were those metal things. At first they appeared almost alive, with their quick, sure movements. But mechanical sounds came from them, little clatterings and hummings. They were stark and ugly.

And their eyes roughened my skin with dread. Huge, black, and cold. There was nothing warm in them, nothing human, nothing kind. They were as emotionless as polished lenses. And filled with menace.

"They shall not take me alive!" the Mother piped, lifting herself beside me on tawny coils.

Then, as if something had snapped like a taut wire in my mind, I ran at the nearest of the Eternal Ones, my eyes searching swiftly for a weapon.

It was one of the upright metal rods that I seized. Its lower end was set in an oddly shaped mass of white crystal, which I took to be an insulator of some kind. It shattered when I threw my weight on the rod. And the rod came free in my hands, the white glow vanishing from it, so I saw it was copper.

Thus I was provided with a massive metal club, as heavy as I could readily swing. On earth, it would have weighed far more than I could lift.

Raising it over my head, I sprang in front of the foremost of the advancing machines—a case of bright metal, moving stiffly upon metal limbs, with a dome-shaped shell of crystal upon it, which housed the helpless gray brain, with its black, unpleasant eyes. I saw little tentacles—feeble translucent fingers—reaching from the brain to touch controlling levers.

The machine paused before me. An angry, insistent buzzing came from it. A great, hooked, many-jointed metal lever reached out from it suddenly, as if to seize me.

And I struck, bringing the copper bar down upon the transparent dome with all my strength. The crystal was tough. But the inertia of the copper bar was as great as it would have been upon the earth; its hundreds of pounds came down with a force indeed terrific.

The dome was shattered. And the gray brain smashed into red pulp.

The Eternal Ones would certainly have been able to seize the Mother, without suffering any harm. And probably any other creature of the moon, that might have been brought with her on the matter-transmitting beam. But they were not equipped for

dealing with a being whose muscles were the stronger ones of earth.

The two fellows of the Eternal One I had destroyed fell upon me. Though the copper bar was not very heavy, it was oddly hard to swing, because of its great inertia. The metal limbs of the third machine closed about my body, even as I crushed the brain in the second with another smashing blow.

I squirmed desperately, but I was unable to twist about to get in a position to strike.

Then the Mother was gliding toward me. Blue crest erect upon her golden head, eager light of battle flashing in her violet eyes. From her smooth, tawny sides the mantles were stiffly outstretched. And they were almost scarlet with the flashing lights that played through them. My momentary despair vanished; I felt that she was invincible.

She almost reached me. And then rose upon her glossy coils, and gazed at the brain in the transparent dome of the machine that held me, her membranes still alight.

Abruptly the machine released me; its metal limbs were relaxed, motionless.

My encrimsoned copper mace rose and descended once more, and the machine fell with a clatter upon its side.

"My mental energy is greater than that of the Eternal One," the Mother piped in calm explanation. "I was able to interfere with its neural processes to cause paralysis." She looked about us suddenly.

"But smash the delicate parts of this machine that brought us here. So that if we have the good fortune to escape, they cannot soon bring us back. I know it

is the only one they have, and it does not look as if it could be quickly repaired."

My club was busy again. Delicate coils were battered beneath it. Complex prisms and mirrors and lenses shattered. Delicate wires and grids in crystal shells, which must have been electron tubes, destroyed.

The three machines we had wrecked had been the only ones near. But a score or more of others were soon approaching across the metal-paved court, producing buzzing sounds as if of anger and excitement. Some of them were near before my work was done.

Too many of them to battle. We must attempt an escape.

I stooped, picked up the Mother's warm, downy body, and ran across the platform, toward the ring of approaching machine-beings. Near them, I leaped, as high and as far as I could.



I picked up the Mother's warm downy body and ran toward the ring of machine-beings. Near them I leaped as high and as far as I could.

The spring carried me over them, and a good many yards beyond. In a moment I was in the middle of a worn pavement of metal. The street, almost empty of the machines, ran between ancient and ugly buildings, toward a lofty wall of some material black and brilliant as obsidian.

I hastened desperately toward the wall, moving with great leaps. The Eternal Ones followed in humming, clattering confusion, falling swiftly behind.

They had been taken quite by surprise, of course. And, as the Mother had said, dependence upon the machine had not developed in them the ability to respond quickly to emergencies.

As we later discovered, some of the machines could travel much faster than could we. But, as I have remarked, the things were not of a standard design, all differing. And none of those behind us happened to be of the fastest type.

I do not doubt that they could easily have destroyed us, as we fled. But their object would have been defeated. They wanted the Mother alive.

We reached the shining black wall well ahead of our pursuers. Its surface was smooth and perpendicular; it was fully as high as the cliff up which I had leaped with the Mother. And there was no projecting ledge to save us if I fell short.

I paused, dropping the heavy mace.

"You could toss me up," the Mother suggested. "Then leap."

There was no time for delay. She coiled quickly up into a golden sphere. I hurled her upward, like a football. She vanished over the top of the wall. I lifted the mace, threw it up, and to one side, so it would not strike her.

The Eternal Ones were close behind. A mob-like group of grotesque machines. Buzzing angrily. One of them flung some missile. There was a crashing explosion against the black wall, a flare of green light. I realized the danger of being separated from

the Mother, even as I leaped.

My spring carried me completely over the wall, which was only some five or six feet thick.

I descended into a luxuriant tangle of the green creepers. Foot-thick stems covered the ground in an unbroken network, feathery leaves rising from them higher than my head. I fell on my side in the delicate foliage, struggled quickly to my feet. The green fronds cut off my view in all directions, though I could see the top of the black wall above.

Before I struck the ground I had glimpsed a vast green plain lying away eastward to the horizon. In the north was a distant line of red mountains. The city of the Eternal Ones lay westward.

I saw nothing of the Mother; I could not, in truth, see a dozen feet through the exotic jungle.

"This way," her cautious whistling tones reached me in a moment. "Here is your weapon."

I broke through the masses of delicate fronds in the direction of the sound, found the Mother unharmed, coiled in a golden circle beside the copper bar. She glided silently away; I picked up the bar and followed as rapidly and quietly as I could.

Once I looked back, when we passed a narrow open space, and saw a little group of the Eternal Ones standing upon the black wall. They must have been looking after us, but I do not suppose they saw us.

For the rest of the day—it was early afternoon when we escaped—and all night when the jungle was weird and silvery in the earth light, and until late on the following day, we hastened on. We did not stop except to drink and bathe at a little stream, and to scrape the sweet white powder from a few of the

great argent flowers we passed. We ate as we moved. The jungle of creepers was unbroken; we were always hidden in the luxuriant, delicate foliage.

At first I had been sure we would be followed. But as the hours passed and there was no sign of pursuit, my spirits rose. I doubted now that the Eternal Ones could follow the trail swiftly enough to overtake us. But I still carried the copper mace.

The Mother was less optimistic than I.

"I know they are following," she told me. "I feel them. But we may lose them. If they cannot repair the machine which you wrecked—and I am sure they cannot do it soon."

We had approached a rocky slope, and the Mother found a little cave, beneath an overhanging ledge, in which we rested. Totally exhausted, I threw myself down, and slept like a dead man.

It was early on the next morning when the Mother woke me. She lay coiled at the entrance of the cave, the frail mantles stiffened and flushed a little with rosy light, violet eyes grave and watchful.

"The Eternal Ones follow," she piped. "They are yet far-off. But we must go on."

CHAPTER VIII

An Earth Man Fights

Climbing to the top of the rocky slope, we came out

upon a vast plateau, covered with green moss. The level surface was broken here and there by low hills; but no other vegetation was in view before us. At a distance, the plain resembled a weird desert covered with green snow.

It took six days to cross the moss-grown table-land. We finished the white powder we had carried with us on the fourth day; and we found no water on the fifth or sixth. Though, of course, those days were of only eighteen hours each, we were in a sorry plight when we descended into a valley green with the creepers, watered with a crystal stream whose water seemed the sweetest I had ever tasted.

We ate and rested for two nights and a day, before we went on—though the Mother insisted that the Eternal Ones still followed.

Then, for seventeen days, we followed down the stream, which was joined by countless tributaries until it became a majestic river. On the seventeenth day, the river flowed into a still greater one, which came down a valley many miles wide, covered with yellow thorn-brush and green creepers, and infested with thousands of the purple balloon-creatures, which I had learned to avoid by keeping to the green jungle, where they could not throw their webs with accuracy.

We swam the river, and continued down the eastern bank—it was flowing generally south. Five days later we came in view of a triple peak I well remembered.

Next morning we left the jungle, and climbed up to the little moss-carpeted plateau where I had left the machine. I had feared that it somehow would be gone, or wrecked. But it lay just as I had left it on the day after I landed on the moon. Bright, polished,

window-studded wall of armor, between two projecting plates of gleaming copper.

We reached the door, the Mother gliding beside me.

Trembling with a great eagerness, I turned the knob and opened it. Everything was in order, just as I had left it. The oxygen cylinders, the batteries, the food refrigerator, the central control table, with the chart lying upon it.

In a week—if the mechanism worked as I hoped it would—I should be back upon the earth. Back on Long Island. Ready to report to my uncle, and collect the first payment of my fifty thousand a year.

Still standing on the narrow deck outside the door, I looked down at the Mother.

She was coiled at my feet. The blue plume upon her golden head seemed to droop. The white mantles were limp, dragging. Her violet eyes, staring up at me, somehow seemed wistful and sad.

Abruptly an ache sprang into my heart, and my eyes dimmed, so that the bright golden image of her swam before me. I had hardly realized what her companionship had come to mean to me, in our long days together. Strange as her body was, the Mother had come to be almost human in my thoughts. Loyal, courageous, kind—a comrade.

"You must go with me," I stammered, in a voice gone oddly husky. "Don't know whether the machine will ever get back to earth or not. But at least it will carry us out of reach of the Eternal Ones."

For the first time, the musical pipings of the Mother seemed broken and uneven, as if with emotion.

"No. We have been together long, Adventurer. And

parting is not easy. But I have a great work. The seed of my kind is in me, and it must not die. The Eternal Ones are near. But I will not give up the battle until I am dead."

Abruptly she lifted her tawny length beside me. The limp, pallid mantles were suddenly bright and strong again. They seized my hands in a grasp convulsively tight. The Mother gazed up at my face, for a little time, with deep violet eyes—earnest and lonely and wistful, with the tragedy of her race in them.

Then she dropped, and glided swiftly away.

I looked after her with misty eyes, until she was half across the plateau. On her way to the sea, to find a home for the new race she was to rear. With a leaden heart, and an aching constriction in my throat, I climbed through the oval door, into the machine, and fastened it.

But I did not approach the control table. I stood at the little round windows, watching the Mother gliding away, across the carpet of moss. Going ahead alone ... the last of her race....

Then I looked in the other direction, and saw the Eternal Ones. She had said the machines were near. I saw five of them. They were moving swiftly across the plateau, the way we had come.

Five grotesque machines. Their bright metal cases were larger than those of the ones we had encountered in the city. And their limbs were longer. They stalked like moving towers of metal, each upon four jointed stilts. And long, flail-like limbs dangled from the case of each. Crystal domes crowned them, sparkling in the sunlight—covering, I knew, the feeble gray brains that controlled them. The Eternal Ones.

Almost at the edge of the plateau they were when I first saw them. I had time easily to finish sealing the door, to close the valve through which I had let out the excess air upon landing, and to drive up through the moon's atmosphere, toward the white planet.

But I did not move to do those things. I stood at the window watching, hands clenched so that nails cut into my palms, set teeth biting through my lip.

Then, as they came on, I moved suddenly, governed not by reason but by an impulse that I could not resist. I opened the door and clambered hastily out, picking up the great copper mace that I had left lying outside.

And I crouched beside the machine, waiting.

Looking across the way the Mother had gone, I saw her at the edge of the plateau. A tiny, distant form, upon the green moss. I think she had already seen the machines, and realizing the futility of flight had turned back to face them.

As the machine-things came by, I was appalled at their size. The metal stilts were fully six feet long, the vulnerable crystal domes eight feet above the ground.

I leaped up, and struck at the brain of the nearest, as it passed. My blow crushed the transparent shell and the soft brain within it. But the machine toppled toward me, and I fell with it to the ground, cruelly bruised beneath its angular levers.

One leg was fast beneath it, pinned against the ground, and its weight was so great that I could not

immediately extricate myself. But I had clung to the copper bar, and when another machine bent down, as if to examine the fallen one, I seized the weapon with both hands, and placed another fatal blow.

The second machine fell stiffly beside me, an odd humming sound continuing within it, in such a position that it almost concealed me from the others. I struggled furiously to free my leg, while the other Eternal Ones gathered about, producing curious buzzing sounds.

At last I was free, and on my knees. Always slow in such an unexpected emergency, the machine-beings had taken no action, though they continued the buzzing.

One of them sprang toward me as I moved, striking a flailing blow at me with a metal arm. I leaped up at it, avoiding the sweeping blow, and struck its crystal case with the end of the copper bar.

The bar smashed through the crystal dome, and crushed the frail brain-thing within it. But the machine still moved. It went leaping away across the plateau, its metal limbs still going through the same motions as before I had killed the ruling brain.

I fell back to the ground, rolling over quickly to avoid its stalking limbs, and struggling to my feet, still holding grimly to the copper bar.

The remaining machine-beings rushed upon me, flailing out with metal limbs. Desperately, I leaped into the air, rising ten feet above their glistening cases. I came down upon the case of one, beside the crystal dome that housed its brain. I braced my feet and struck, before it could snatch at me with its hooked levers.

As it fell to the moss, humming, buzzing, and threshing about with bright metal limbs, I leaped from it toward the other, holding the bar before me. But I struck only the metal case, without harming it, and fell from it into the moss.

Before I could stir, the thing drove its metal limb down upon my body. It struck my chest with a force that was agonizing ... crushing. A rocket of fiery pain seemed to burst in my brain. For a moment, I think, I was unconscious. Then I was coughing up bloody foam.

I lay on the red moss, unable to move, the grim realization that I would die breaking over me in a black wave, that swept away even my pain. The metal limb had been lifted from me.

Then the Mother was beside me. She had come back.

Her warm smooth furry body was pressed against my side. I saw her violet eyes, misty, appealing. She laid the rose-flushed mantles over my side. The pain went suddenly from it. And I felt new strength, so I could get to my feet, though red mist still came from my nostrils, and I felt a hot stream of blood down my side.

The remaining machine-monster was bending, reaching for the Mother. I seized the copper mace again, struck a furious blow at the crystal shell that housed its brain. As it crashed down, beating about blindly and madly with its great metal limbs, my new strength went suddenly from me and I fell again, coughing once more.

A flailing limb struck the Mother a terrific blow, flinging her against the moss many yards away. She crept back to me, brokenly, slowly. Her golden fur was stained with crimson. Her mantles were limp

and pale. There was agony in her eyes.

She came to where I lay, collapsed against my side. Very low, her musical tones reached my ears and died abruptly with a choking sound. She had tried to tell me something, and could not.

The last of the Eternal Ones that had followed was dead, and presently the machines ceased their humming and buzzing and threshing about upon the moss.

Through the rest of the day we lay there, side by side, both unable to move. And through the strange night, when the huge white disk of the earth bathed us in silvery splendor, and in my delirium I dreamed alternately of my life upon it, and of my adventures upon this weird moon-world, with the Mother.

When the argent earth was low, and we were cold and drenched with dew, lying very close together to benefit from each other's warmth, the wild dreams passed. For a few minutes I was coldly sane. I looked back upon a life that had never had any great purpose, that had been lived carelessly, and impulsively. And I was not sorry that I had come to the moon.

I remained with the Mother until she stirred no more, and no effort on my part could rouse her to life. With tears in my eyes, I buried her beneath the green moss. Then stumbling to the ship I climbed in. Sealing the door and starting the machinery, I felt the ship lift quickly toward the distant beckoning earth.

THE END

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE MOON ERA ***

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