



## **The Raid on the Termites**

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**About Ernst:**

Paul Frederick Ernst (1899 - 1985) was an American pulp fiction writer. He is best known as the author of the original 24 "Avenger" novels, published by Street and Smith Publications under the house name Kenneth Robeson.

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# Chapter 1

## The Challenge of the Mound

It was a curious, somehow weird-looking thing, that mound. About a yard in height and three and a half in diameter, it squatted in the grassy grove next the clump of trees like an enormous, inverted soup plate. Here and there tufts of grass waved on it, of a richer, deeper color, testifying to the unwholesome fertility of the crumbling outer stuff that had flaked from the solid mound walls.

Like an excrescence on the flank of Mother Earth herself, the mound loomed; like an unhealthy, cancerous growth. And inside the enigmatic thing was another world. A dark world, mysterious, horrible, peopled by blind and terrible demons—a world like a Dante's dream of a second Inferno.

Such, at least, were the thoughts of Dennis Braymer as he worked with delicate care at the task of sawing into the hard cement of a portion of the wall near the rounded top.

His eyes, dark brown and rimmed with thick black lashes, flashed earnestly behind his glasses as they concentrated on his difficult job. His face, lean and tanned, was a mask of seriousness. To him, obviously, this was a task of vital importance; a task worthy of all a man's ability of brain and logic.

Obviously also, his companion thought of the work as just something with which to fill an idle afternoon. He puffed at a pipe, and regarded the entomologist with a smile.

To Jim Holden, Denny was simply fussing fruitlessly and absurdly with an ordinary "ant-hill," as he persisted in miscalling a termitary. Playing with bugs, that was all. Wasting his time poking into the affairs of termites—and acting, by George, as though those affairs were of supreme significance!

He grinned, and tamped and relighted the tobacco in his pipe. He refrained from putting his thoughts into words, however. He knew, of old,

that Denny was apt to explode if his beloved work were interrupted by a careless layman. Besides, Dennis had brought him here rather under protest, simply feeling that it was up to a host to do a little something or other by way of trying to amuse an old college mate who had come for a week's visit. Since he was there on sufferance, so to speak, it was up to him to keep still and not interrupt Denny's play.

The saw rasped softly another time or two, then moved, handled with surgeon's care, more gently—till at last a section about as big as the palm of a man's hand was loose on the mound-top.

Denny's eyes snapped. His whole wiry, tough body quivered. He visibly held his breath as he prepared to flip back that sawed section of curious, strong mound wall.

He snatched up his glass, overturned the section.

Jim drew near to watch, too, seized in spite of himself by some of the scientist's almost uncontrollable excitement.

Under the raised section turmoil reigned for a moment. Jim saw a horde of brownish-white insects, looking something like ants, dashing frenziedly this way and that as the unaccustomed light of sun and exposure of outer air impinged upon them. But the turmoil lasted only a little while.

Quickly, in perfect order, the termites retreated. The exposed honeycomb of cells and runways was deserted. A slight heaving of earth told how the insects were blocking off the entrances to the exposed floor, and making that floor their new roof to replace the roof this invading giant had stripped from over them.

In three minutes there wasn't a sign of life in the hole. The observation—if one could call so short a glimpse at so abnormally acting a colony an observation—was over.

Denny rose to his feet, and dashed his glass to the ground. His face was twisted in lines of utter despair, and through his clenched teeth the breath whistled in uneven gasps.

"My God!" he groaned. "My God—if only I could see them! If only I could get in there, and watch them at their normal living. But it's always like this. The only glance we're permitted is at a stampede following the wrecking of a termitary. And that tells us no more about the real natures of the things than you could tell about the nature of normal men by watching their behavior after an earthquake!"

Jim Holden tapped out his pipe. On his face the impatiently humorous look gave place to a measure of sympathy. Good old Denny. How he took these trivial disappointments to heart. But, how odd that any man could get so worked up over such small affairs! These bugologists were queer people.

"Oh, well," he said, half really to soothe Denny, half deliberately to draw him out, "why get all boiled up about the contrariness of ordinary little bugs?"

Denny rose to the bait at once. "Ordinary little bugs? If you knew what you were talking about, you wouldn't dismiss the termite so casually! These 'ordinary little bugs' are the most intelligent, the most significant and highly organized of all the insect world.

"Highly organized?" he repeated himself, his voice deepening. "They're like a race of intelligent beings from another planet—superior even to Man, in some ways. They have a king and queen. They have 'soldiers,' developed from helpless, squashy things into nightmare creations with lobster-claw mandibles longer than the rest of their bodies put together. They have workers, who bore the tunnels and build the mounds. And they have winged ones from among which are picked new kings and queens to replace the original when they get old and useless. And all these varied forms, Jim, they hatch at will, through some marvelous power of selection, from the same, identical kind of eggs. Now, I ask you, could you take the unborn child and make it into a man with four arms or a woman with six legs and wings, at will, as these insects, in effect, do with theirs?"

"I never tried," said Jim.

"Just a soft, helpless, squashy little bug, to begin with," Denny went on, ignoring his friend's levity. "Able to live only in warm countries—yet dying when exposed directly to the sun. Requiring a very moist atmosphere, yet exiled to places where it doesn't rain for months at a time. And still, under circumstances harsher even than those Man has had to struggle against, they have survived and multiplied."

"Bah, bugs," murmured Jim maddeningly.

But again Denny ignored him, and went on with speculations concerning the subject that was his life passion. He was really thinking aloud, now; the irreverent Holden was for the moment nonexistent.

"And the something, the unknown intelligence, that seems to rule each termitary! The something that seems able to combine oxygen from the air with hydrogen from the wood they eat and make necessary moisture; the something that directs all the blind subjects in their marvelous underground architecture; the something that, at will, hatches a dozen different kinds of beings from the common stock of eggs—what can it be? A sort of super-termite? A super-intellect set in the minute head of an insect, yet equal to the best brains of mankind? We'll probably never know, for, whatever the unknown intelligence is, it lurks in the foundations of the termitaries, yards beneath the surface, where we cannot penetrate without blowing up the whole mound—and at the same time destroying all the inhabitants."

Jim helped Denny gather up his scientific apparatus. They started across the fields toward Denny's roadster, several hundred yards away—Jim, blond and bulking, a hundred and ninety pounds of hardy muscle and bone; Denny wiry and slender, dark-eyed and dark-haired. The sledge-hammer and the rapier; the human bull, and the human panther; the one a student kept fit by outdoor studies, and the other a careless, rich young time-killer groomed to the pink by the big-game hunting and South Sea sailing and other adventurous ways of living he preferred.

"This stuff is all very interesting," he said perfunctorily, "but what has it to do with practical living? How will the study of bugs, no matter how remarkable the bug, be of benefit to the average man? What I mean is, your burning zeal—your really bitter disappointment a minute ago—seem a bit out of place. A bit—well, exaggerated don't you know."

Denny halted; and Jim, perforce, stopped, too. Denny's dark eyes burned into Jim's blue ones.

"How does it affect practical living? You, who have been in the tropics many times on your lion-spearing and snake-hunting jaunts, ask such a thing? Haven't you ever seen the damage these infernal things can do?"

Jim shook his head. "I've never happened to be in termite country, though I've heard tales about them."

"If you've heard stories, you have at least in idea of their deadliness when they're allowed to multiply. You must have heard how they literally eat up houses and the furnishings within, how they consume telegraph poles, railroad ties, anything wooden within reach. The termite is a ghastly menace. When they move in—men eventually move out! And

their appearance here in California has got many a nationally famous man half crazy. That's what they mean to the average person!"

Jim, scratched his head. "I didn't think of that angle of it," he admitted.

"Well, it's time you thought of something besides fantastic ways of risking your life. The termite has been kept in place, till now, by only two things: ants, which are its bitterest enemies, and constantly attack and hamper its development; and climatic conditions, which bar it from the temperate zones. Now suppose, with all their intelligence and force of organization—not to mention that mysterious and terrible unknown intelligence that leads them—they find a way to whip the ants once for all, and to immunize themselves to climatic changes? Mankind will probably be doomed."

"Gosh," said Jim, with exaggerated terror.

"Laugh if you want to," said Dennis, "but I tell you the termite is a very real menace. Even in its present stage of development. And the maddening thing is that we can't observe them and so discover how best to fight them.

"To get away from the light that is fatal to them, they build mounds like that behind us, of silicated, half-digested wood, which hardens into a sort of cement that will turn the cutting edge of steel. If you pry away some of the wall to spy on them, you get the fiasco I was just rewarded with. If you try to penetrate to the depths of the mystery, yards underground, by blowing up the termitary with gun powder, the only way of getting to the heart of things—you destroy the termites. Strays are seldom seen; in order, again, to avoid light and air-exposure, they tunnel underground or build tubes above ground to every destination. Always they keep hidden and secret. Always they work from within, which is why walls and boards they have devoured look whole: the outer shell has been left untouched and all the core consumed."

"Can't you get at the beasts in the laboratory?" asked Jim.

"No. If you put them into glass boxes to watch them, they manage to corrode the glass so it ceases to be transparent. And they can bore their way out of any wood, or even metal, containers you try to keep them in. The termite seems destined to remain a gruesome, marvelous, possibly deadly mystery."

He laughed abruptly, shrugged his shoulders, and started toward the car again.

"When I get off on my subject, there's no telling when I'll stop. But, Jim, I tell you, I'd give years of my life to be able to do what all entomologists are wild to do—study the depths of a termite mound. God! What wouldn't I give for the privilege of shrinking to ant-size, and roaming loose in that secretive-looking mound behind us!"

He laughed again, and slapped Holden's broad back.

"*There* would be a thrill for you, you bored adventurer! There would be exploration work! A trip to Mars wouldn't be in it. The nightmare monsters you would see, the hideous creations, the cannibalism, the horrible but efficient slave system carried on by these blind, intelligent things in the dark depths of the subterranean cells! Lions? Suppose you were suddenly confronted by a thing as big as a horse, with fifteen-foot jaws of steely horn that could slice you in two and hardly know it! How would you like that?"

And now in the other man's eyes there was a glint, while his face expressed aroused interest.

Every man to his own game, thought Denny curiously, watching the transformation. He lived for scientific experiments and observations having to do with termites. Holden existed, apparently, only for the thrill of pitting his brain and brawn against dangerous beasts, wild surroundings, or tempestuous elements. If only their two supreme interests in life could be combined... .

"How would I like it?" said Jim. "Denny, old boy, when you can introduce me to an adventure like that ... " He waved his arm violently to complete the sentence. "What a book of travel it would make! 'The Raid on the Termites. Exploring an Insect Hell. Death in an Ant-hill... .'"

"Termitary! Termitary!" corrected Denny irritably.

"Whatever you want to call it," Jim conceded airily. He dumped the apparatus he was carrying into the rear compartment of the roadster. "But why speak of miracles? Even if we were sent to a modern hand laundry, we could hardly be shrunk to ant-size. Shall we ramble along home?"



## Chapter 2

### The Pact

"What are we going to do to-night?" asked Jim.

Dennis looked quizzically at his big friend. Jim was pacing restlessly up and down the living room of the bachelor apartment, puffing jerkily at his eternal pipe. Dennis knew the symptoms. Though he hadn't seen Jim for over a year, he remembered his characteristics well enough.

Some men seem designed only for action. They are out of step with the modern era. They should have lived centuries ago when the world was more a place of physical, and less of purely mental, rivalry.

Jim was of this sort. Each time he returned from some trip—to Siberia, the Congo, the mountainous wilderness of the Caucasus—he was going to settle down and stop hopping about the globe from one little-known and dangerous spot to another. Each time, in a matter of weeks, he grew restless again, spoiling for action. Then came another impulsive journey.

He was spoiling for action now. He didn't really care what happened that evening, what was planned. His question was simply a bored protest at a too tame existence—a wistful hope that Denny might lighten his boredom, somehow.

"What are we going to do to-night?"

"Well," said Denny solemnly, "Mrs. Van Raggan is giving a reception this evening. We might go there and meet all the Best People. There is a lecture on the esthetics of modern art at Philamo Hall. Or we can see a talkie—"

"My Lord!" fumed Jim. Then: "Kidding aside, can't you dig up something interesting?"

"Kidding aside," said Dennis, in a different tone, "I have dug up something interesting. We're going to visit a friend of mine, Matthew Breen. A young man, still unknown, who, in my opinion, is one of our greatest physicists. Matt is a kind of savage, so he may take to you. If he

does—and if he's feeling in a good humor—he may show you some laboratory stunts that will afford you plenty of distraction. Come along—you're wearing out my rugs with your infernal pacing up and down!"

Matt Breen's place was in a ratty part of the poorer outskirts of town; and his laboratory was housed by what had once been a barn. But place and surroundings were forgotten at sight of the owner's face.

Huge and gaunt, with unblinking, frosty gray eyes, looking more like an arctic explorer than a man of science, Matt towered over the average man and carelessly dominated any assembly by sheer force of mentality. He even towered a little over big Jim Holden now, as he absently shook hands with him.

"Come in, come in," he said, his voice vague. And to Denny: "I'm busy as the devil, but you can watch over my shoulder if you want to. Got something new on. Great thing—though I don't think it'll have any practical meaning."

The two padded after him along a dusty hallway, up a flight of stairs that was little more than a ladder, and into the cavernous loft of the old barn which had been transformed into a laboratory.

Jim drew Denny aside a pace or two. "He says he's got something new. Isn't he afraid to show it to a stranger like me?"

"Afraid? Why should he be?"

"Well, ideas do get stolen now and then, you know."

Denny smiled. "When Matt gets hold of something new, you can be sure the discovery isn't a new kind of can-opener or patent towel-rack that can be 'stolen.' His ideas are safe for the simple reason that there probably aren't more than four other scientists on earth capable of even dimly comprehending them. All you and I can do—whatever this may turn out to be—is to watch and marvel."

Matt, meanwhile, had lumbered with awkward grace to a great wooden pedestal. Cupping down over this was a glass bell, about eight feet high, suspended from the roof.

Around the base of the pedestal was a ring of big lamp-affairs, that looked like a bank of flood-lights. The only difference was that where flood-lights would have had regular glass lenses to transmit light beams,

these had thin plates of lead across the openings. Thick copper conduits branched to each from a big dynamo.

Matt reached into a welter of odds and ends on a bench, and picked up a tube. Rather like an ordinary electric light bulb, it looked, save that there were no filaments in the thin glass shell. Where filaments should have been there was a thin cylinder of bluish-gray metal.

"Element number eighty-five," said Matt in his deep, abstracted voice, pointing at the bluish cylinder. "Located it about a year ago. Last of the missing elements. Does strange tricks when subjected to heavy electric current. In each of those things that look like searchlights is one of these bulbs."

He laid down the extra tube, turned toward a door in the near wall, then turned back to his silent guests again. Apparently he felt they were due a little more enlightenment.

"Eighty-five isn't nearly as radioactive as the elements akin to it," he said. Satisfied that he had now explained everything, he started again toward the door.

As he neared it, Dennis and Jim heard a throaty growling, and a vicious scratching on the wooden panels. And as Matt opened the door a big mongrel dog leaped savagely at him!

Calmly, Matt caught the brute by the throat and held it away from him at arm's length, seeming hardly to be aware of its eighty-odd pounds of struggling weight. Into Jim's eyes crept a glint of admiration. It was a feat of strength as well as of animal management; and, himself proficient in both, Jim could accord tribute where it was due.

"You came just as I was about to try an experiment on the highest form of life I've yet exposed to my new rays," he said, striding easily toward the glass bell with the savage hound. "It's worked all right with frogs and snakes—but will it work with more complex creatures? Mammalian creatures? That's a question."

Denny forbore to ask him what It did, how It worked, what the devil It was, anyway. From his own experience he knew that the abstraction of an experimenter insulates him from every outside contact. Matt, he realized, was probably making a great effort to remain aware that they were there in the laboratory at all; probably thought he had explained in great detail his new device and its powers.

Vaguely wrapped in his fog of concentration, Matt thrust the snarling dog under the bell, which he lowered quickly till it rested on the pedestal-floor and ringed the dog with a wall of glass behind which it barked and growled soundlessly.

Completely preoccupied again, Matt went to a big switch and threw it. The dynamo hummed, raised its pitch to a high, almost intolerable keening note. The ring of pseudo-searchlights seemed in an ominous sort of way to spring into life. The impression must have been entirely imaginary; actually the projectors didn't move in the slightest, didn't even vibrate. Yet the conviction persisted in the minds of both Jim and Dennis that some black, invisible force was pouring down those conduits, to be sifted, diffused, and hurled through the lead lenses at the dog in the bell.

Thrilled to the core, not having the faintest idea what it was they were about to see, but convinced that it must surely be of stupendous import, the two stared unwinkingly at the furious hound. Matt was staring, too; but his glance was almost casual, and was concentrated more on the glass of the bell than on the experimental object.

The reason for the direction of his gaze almost immediately became apparent. And as the reason was disclosed, Dennis and Jim exclaimed aloud in disappointment—at the same time, so intense was their nameless suspense, not knowing they had opened their mouths. It appeared that for yet a little while they were to remain in ignorance of the precise meaning of the experiment.

The glass of the bell was clouding. A swirling, milky vapor, not unlike fog, was filling the bell from top to bottom.

The dog, rapidly being hidden from sight by the gathering mist, suddenly stopped its antics and stood still in the center of the bell as though overcome by surprise and indecision. Motionless, staring vacantly, it stood there for an instant—then was concealed completely by the rolling vapor.

But just before it disappeared, Jim turned to Denny in astonishment, to see if Denny had observed what he had; namely, that the fog seemed not to be gathering from the air penned up in the bell, but in some strange and rather awful way to be exuding *from the body of the dog itself!*

The two stared back at the bell again, neither one sure he had been right in his impression. But now the glass was entirely opaque. So thick

was the vapor within that it seemed on the point of turning to a liquid. Inside, swathed in the secrecy of the fleecy folds of mist—what was happening to the dog? The two men could only guess.

Matt glanced up at an electric clock with an oversized second hand. His fingers moved nervously on the switch, then threw it to cut contact. The dynamo keened its dying note. A silence so tense that it hurt filled the great laboratory.

All eyes were glued on the bell.

The thick vapor that had been swirling and crowding as if to force itself through the glass, grew less restive in motion. Then it began to rise, ever more slowly, toward the top.

More and more compactly it packed itself into the arched glass dome, the top layers finally resembling nothing so much as cloudy beef gelatin. And now these top layers were solidifying, clinging to the glass.

Meanwhile, the bottom line of the vapor was slowly rising, an inch at a time, like a shimmering curtain being raised from a stage floor. At last ten inches showed between the pedestal and the swaying bottom of the almost liquid vapor. Jim and Denny stooped to peer under the blanket of cloud. The dog! In what way had it been affected?

Again they exclaimed aloud, involuntarily, unconsciously.

There was no dog to be seen.

With about fourteen clear inches now exposed, they looked a second time, more intently. But their first glance had been right. The dog was gone from the bell. Utterly and completely vanished! Or so, at least, they thought at the moment.

The rising and solidifying process of the vapor went on, while Dennis and Jim stood, almost incapable of movement, and watched to see what Breen was going to do next.

His next move came in about four minutes, when the crowding vapor had at last completely come to rest at the top of the dome like a deposit of opaque jelly. He stepped to the windlass that raised the bell, and turned the handle.

Immediately the two watchers strode impulsively toward the exposed pedestal floor.

"Wait a minute," commanded the scientist, his eyes sparkling with almost ferocious intensity. The two stopped. "You might step on it," he added, amazingly.

He caught up a common glass water tumbler, and cautiously moved to the edge of the platform. "It may be dead, of course," he muttered. "But I might as well be prepared."

Wonderingly, Jim and Dennis saw that he was intently searching every square inch of the pedestal flooring. Then they saw him crawl, like a stalking cat, toward a portion near the center—saw him clap the tumbler, upside down, over some unseen thing... .

"Got him!" came Matt's deep, fuzzy voice. "And he isn't dead, either. Not by a long way! Now we'll get a magnifying glass and study him."

Feeling like figures in a dream, Jim and Dennis looked through the lens with their absorbed host.

Capering about under the inverted tumbler, like a four-legged bug—and not a very large bug, either—was an incredible thing. A thing with a soft, furry coat such as no true insect possesses. A thing with tiny, canine jaws, from which hung a panting speck of a tongue like no bug ever had.

"Yes," rumbled Matt, "the specimen is far indeed from being dead. I don't know how long it might exist in so microscopic a state, nor whether it has been seriously deranged, body or brain, by the diminishing process. But at least—it's alive."

"My God!" whispered Dennis. And, his first coherent sentence since the physicist had thrown the switch: "So this—*this*—is the overgrown brute you put under the bell a few minutes ago! This eighth-of-an-inch thing that is a miniature cartoon of a dog!"

Jim could merely stare from the tumbler and the marvel it walled in, to the man who had worked the miracle, and back to the tumbler again.

Denny sighed. "That thick, jellylike substance in the top of the bell," he said, "what is it?"

"Oh, that." The miracle worker didn't lift his eyes from the tumbler and the very much alive and protesting bit of life it housed. "That's the dog. Rather, it's practically all of the dog save for this small residue of substance that clothes the vital life-spark."

Jim dabbed at his forehead and found it moist with sweat. "But how is it done?" he said shakily.

"With element eighty-five, as I told you," said Breen, most of whose attention was occupied by a new stunt he was trying: he had cut a microscopic sliver of meat off a gnawed bone, and was sliding it under the glass. Would the dog eat? Could it... ?

It could, and would! With a mighty bound, that covered all of a quarter of an inch, the tiny thing leaped on the meat and began to gnaw wolfishly at it. The effect was doubly shocking—to see this perfect little creature acting like any regular, full-sized dog, although as tiny as a woman's beauty spot!

"Marvelous stuff, eighty-five," Matt went on. "Any living thing, exposed to the lead-filtered emanations it gives off when disintegrated electrically to precisely the right degree, is reduced indefinitely in size. I could have made that dog as small as a microbe, even sub-visible perhaps, if I chose. Curious... . Maybe the presence of eighty-five in minute quantities on earth is all that has kept every living thing from growing indefinitely, expanding gigantically right off the face of the globe... ."

But now Dennis was hardly listening to him. A notion so fantastic, so bizarre that he could not at once grasp it fully, had just struck him.

"Listen," he said at last, his voice so hoarse as to be almost unrecognizable, "listen—can you reverse that process?"

Matt nodded, and pointed to the viscous deposit in the dome of the bell. "The protoplasmic substance is still there. It can be rebuilt, remolded to its original form any time I put the dog back in the bell and let the particles of eighty-five, which are suspended in the vacuum tubes, settle back into their original, inert mass. You see, there is such a close affinity—"

Dennis cut him short almost rudely. It wasn't causes, marvelous though they might be, that he was interested in; it was results.

"Would you dare ... that is ... would you like to try that experiment on a human being?"

Now for once the inventor's entire interest was seized by something outside his immediate work. He stared open-mouthed at Dennis.

"Would I?" he breathed. "Would I like ... " He grunted. "Such a question! No experiment is complete till man, the highest form of all life, has been subjected to it. I'd give anything for the chance!" He sighed explosively. "But of course that's impossible. I could never get anyone to be a subject. And I can't have it tried on myself because I'm the only one able to handle my apparatus in the event that anything goes wrong."

"But—would you try it on a human being if you had a chance?" persisted Denny.

"Hah!"

"And could you reduce a human being in stature as radically as you did the dog? For example, could you make a man ... ant-size?"

Matt nodded vigorously, eyes fairly flaming. "I could make him even smaller."

Dennis stared at Jim. His face was transfigured. He shook with nervous eagerness. And Jim gazed back at Dennis as breathlessly and as tensely.

"Well?" said Dennis at last.

Jim nodded slowly.

"Yes," he said. "Of course."

And in those few words two men were committed to what was perhaps the strangest, most deadly, and surely the most unique, adventure the world has yet known. The improbable had happened. A man who lived but for dangers and extraordinary action, and a man who would have gambled his soul for the scientist's ecstasy of at last learning all about a hidden study—both had seen suddenly open up to them a broad avenue leading to the very pinnacle of their dreams.



# Chapter 3

## Ant-Sized Men

Next morning, at scarcely more than daybreak, Jim and Denny stood, stripped and ready for the dread experiment, beside Matthew Breen's glass bell. The night, of course, had been sleepless. Sleep? How could slumber combat the fierce anticipations, the exotic imaginings, the clanging apprehensions of the two?

Most of the night had been spent by Denny in dutifully arguing with Jim about the advisability of his giving up the adventure, in soothing his conscience by presenting in all the angles he could think of the risks they would run.

"You'll be entering a different world, Jim," Denny had said. "An unimaginably different world. A terrible world, in which you'll be a naked, soft, defenseless thing. I'd hate to bet that we'd live even to reach the territory. And once inside that—it's odds of seven to one that we'll never get out again."

"Stow it," Jim had urged, puffing at his pipe.

"I won't stow it. You may think you've run up against dangers before, but let me tell you that your most perilous jungle is safe as a church compared to the jungle an ordinary grass plot will present to us, if, as we plan, we get reduced to a quarter of an inch. I'm going in this with a mission. To me it's a heaven-sent opportunity—one I'm sure any entomologist would grab at. But you, frankly, are just a fool—"

"All right," Jim had cut in, "let it go at that. I'm confirmed in my folly. You can't argue me out of it, so don't try any more. Now, to be practical—have you thought of any way we could arm ourselves?"

"Arm ourselves?" repeated Dennis vaguely.

"Yes. It's a difficult problem. The finest watch-maker couldn't turn out a working model of a gun that could be handled by a man a quarter of an inch tall. At the same time I have no desire to go into this thing barehanded. And I think I know something we can use."

"What?"

"Spears," said Jim with a grin. "Steel spears. They make steel wire, you know, down to two-thousandths of an inch and finer. Probably our friend has some in his laboratory. Now, if we grind two pieces about a quarter of an inch long off such a wire, and sharpen the ends as well as we can, we'll have short spears we could swing very well.

"Then, there's the matter of clothes." He grinned again. "We'll want a breech clout, at least. I propose that we get the sheerest silk gauze we can find, and cut an eighth-inch square apiece to tie about our middles after the transformation."

He slapped his fist into his palm. "By George! Such talk really begins to bring it home. Two men, clad in eighth-inch squares of silk gauze, using bits of almost invisibly fine steel wire as weapons, junketing forth into a world in which they'll be about the smallest and puniest things in sight! No more lords of creation, Denny. We'll have nothing but our wits to carry us through. But they, of course, will be supreme in the insect world as they are in the animal world."

"Will they be supreme?" Denny said softly. That unknown intelligence—that mysterious intellect (super-termite?) that seemed to rule each termite tribe, and which appeared so marvelously profound! "I wonder... ."

Then he, in his turn, had descended to the practical.

"You've solved the problem of weapons and clothing, Jim," he said, "and now for my contribution." He left the room and came back in a few minutes with something in his hands. "Here are some shields for us.

"Oh, not pieces of steel armor. Shields in a figurative more than a literal sense."

He set down a small porcelain pot, and opened it. Within was a repulsive-looking, whitish-brown paste.

"Ground-up termites," he explained. "If we're to go wandering around in a termitary, we've got to persuade the inmates that we're friends, not foes. So we'll smear ourselves all over with this termite-paste before ever we enter the mound."

"Clever, these supposedly impractical scientists," murmured Jim, with a lightness that did not quite succeed in covering his real admiration of the shrewdness of the thought.

And now they stood in front of Breen's glass bell, with Breen beside them all eagerness to begin the experiment.

"What am I supposed to do after I've reduced you to the proper size?" he asked.

"Take us out to Morton's Grove, to the big termitary you'll find about a quarter of a mile off the road," said Denny. "Set us down near the opening to one of the larger termite tunnels. Then wait till we come out again. You may have to wait quite a while—but that isn't much to ask in return for our submission to your rays."

"I'll wait a week, if you wish. Let's see, what had I better carry you in?"

It was decided—with a lack of forethought later to be bitterly regretted—that an ordinary patty-dish of the kind in which restaurants serve butter, would make as good a conveyance as anything else.

Matt got the patty-dish and placed it on the pedestal floor, tipping it on edge so Jim and Denny would be able to climb into it unaided (he wouldn't dare attempt to lift bodies so small for fear of mortally injuring them between thumb and forefinger). Into the patty-dish, so they could be readily located, were placed the bits of wire, the tiny fragments of silk gauze to serve as breech clouts, and a generous dab of termite-paste; and the two men stepped inside the glass dome to share the fate that, the night before, had been the dog's.

The bell was lowered around them. They watched the inventor step to the switch and pull it down... .

At first there was no sensation whatever. Almost with incredulity, they watched the glass walls cloud, realized that the fogging vapor was formed of exudations from their own substance. Then physical reaction set in.

The first symptom was paralysis. With the vapor wreathing their heads in dense clouds, they found themselves unable to move a muscle. The paralysis spread partially to the involuntary muscles. Heart action was retarded enormously; and they ceased almost entirely to breathe. In spite of the cessation of muscular functioning, however, they were still conscious in a vague way. Conscious enough, at all events, to go through a hell of agony when—second and last stage—every nerve in their bodies seemed of a sudden to be rasped with files, and every tiny particle of their flesh jerked and twitched as if to break loose from the ever-shrinking skin.

Time, of course, was completely lost sight of. It might have been ten hours, or five minutes later when they realized they were still alive, still standing on their own feet, and now able to breathe and move. The spell of rigidity had been broken; nerves and muscles functioned smoothly and painlessly again. Also they were in clear air.

"I guess the experiment didn't work," Dennis began unsteadily. But then, as his eyes began to get accustomed to his fantastically new, though intrinsically unchanged surroundings, he cried aloud.

The experiment *had* worked. No doubt of that! And they were in a world where all the old familiar things were new and incredible marvels.

"What can be the nature of this stuff we're standing on?" wondered Jim, looking down.

Following his gaze, Denny too wondered for an instant, till realization came to him. "Why, it's ordinary wood! Just the wood of the pedestal platform!"

But it didn't seem like wood. The grain stood out in knee-high ridges in all directions to the limit of visibility. It was like a nightmare picture of a frozen bad-lands, split here and there by six-foot-broad, unfathomable chasms—which were the cracks in the flooring.

"Where's the patty-dish?" queried Jim.

Dennis gazed about. "We were standing right over it when the reducing process started... . Oh, there it is!"

Far off to the right an enormous, shallowly hollowed plateau caught their eyes. They started toward it, hurdling the irregular ridges, leaping across the dizzy chasms.

The tiny dish had been tipped on edge—but when they reached it they found its thickness alone a daunting thing.

"It's a pity Matt didn't select a thinner kind of china," grumbled Dennis; gazing at the head-high wall that was the edge of the plate. "Here—I'll stand on your shoulders, and then give you an arm up. Look out—it's slippery!"

It was. Their feet slid out from under them on the glazed surface repeatedly. It was with the utmost effort that they finally made their way to the center of the shallow plateau.

There, lying beside two heaps of coarse cloth and a mound of horrible-smelling stuff that he recognized as the dab of termite-paste, they saw two glistening steel bars. About five feet long, they seemed to be, and half an inch in diameter. The wire-ends which, a few moments ago, they had been forced to handle with tweezers for fear of losing!

Jim picked one up and drew it back for a pretended spear-thrust. He laughed, vibrantly, eagerly.

"I'm just beginning to realize it's really happened, and that the hunt has started. Bring on your bugs!"

Dennis stooped and picked up his spear. It was unwieldy, ponderous, the weight of that long, not-too-thin steel bar. Jim's great shoulders and heavy arms were suited well enough to such a weapon; but Dennis could have wished that his were some pounds lighter.

They turned their attention to the evil-smelling hill of termite-ointment. With many grimaces, they took turns in smearing each other from head to feet with the repulsive stuff. Then they knotted about them the yard-square pieces of fabric—once sheer silk gauze, now cloth as stiff and cumbersome as sail-cloth. They faced each other, ready for their trip.

The heavens above them, trailing up and up into mysterious darknesses, suddenly became closer and sparkled with a diamond sheen. Stretching off and up out of sight was a mountainous column that might conceivably be a wrist.

"Matt's looking at us through a magnifying glass," concluded Denny.

Abruptly the ridged bad-lands about them began to vibrate. Thunder crashed and roared around their ears.

"He's trying to say something to us," said Denny, when the awful din had ceased. "Oh, Matt—we're ready to go!"

Jim echoed his shout. Then Denny snorted. "Fools! Our voices are probably pitched way above the limit of audibility. He can't hear us any more than we can understand him!"

They gazed at each other. More than anything else that had happened, this showed them how entirely they were cut off from their old world. Truly, in discarding their normal size, they might as well have been marooned on another planet!

A tremendous, pinkish-gray wall lowered near them, split into segments, and surrounded their plateau. The plateau was lifted—with a dizzy swiftness that made their stomachs turn.

With sickening speed the plateau moved forward. The texture of the heavens above them changed. The sun—the one thing in their new universe that seemed unchanged in size and aspect—shone down on them. The plateau came jarringly to rest. Great cliffs of what seemed black basalt gleamed high over them.

Matt had carried them out of the building, and had set the patty-dish on the black leather seat of his automobile.

There was a distant thundering, as though all the worlds in the universe but Earth were being dashed to pieces. That was the motor starting. And then, as the car moved off, Jim and Dennis realized their mistake in choosing a patty-dish to ride in!

In spite of the yielding leather cushion on which their dish was set, the two quarter-inch men were hurled this way and that, jounced horribly up and down, and slid headlong from one end of the plateau to the other as the automobile passed over the city streets. Impossible to stand. They could only crouch low on the hard glazed surface, and try to keep from breaking legs and arms in the worst earthquake it is possible to imagine. Anyone who has ever seen two bugs ill-advisedly try to walk across the vibrating hood of an automobile while the motor is running, will have some idea of the troubles that now beset Dennis and Jim.

"The ass!" groaned Jim, in a comparatively quiet spell. "Why doesn't he drive more carefully?"

"Probably," groaned Denny, "he's doing the best he can."

Probably! All that was left them was conjecture. They could only guess at what was happening in the world about them!

Matthew Breen's face and body were lost in sheer immensity above them. They knew they were riding in a car; but they couldn't see the car. All they could see was the black cliff that was the seat-cushion behind them. The world had disappeared—hidden in its bigness; the world, indeed, was just at present a patty-dish.

Somehow they endured the ride. Somehow they avoided broken bones, and were only shaken up and bruised when the distant roar of the motor ceased and the wind stopped howling about their ears.

"Well, we're here," said Dennis unsteadily. "Now for the real—"

His words were stopped by the sudden rising of the plateau. Again they felt the poignantly exaggerated, express-elevator feeling, till the plateau finally came to rest.

The crashing thunder of Matt's voice came to them, words utterly indistinguishable. The saucer was tipped sideways... .

Doubtless Matt thought he was acting with extreme gentleness; but in fact the dish was tilted so quickly and so without warning that Jim and Dennis slid from its center, head over heels, to fall over the edge and land with a bump on the ground. Their spears, sliding after, narrowly missed impaling them.

Once more came the distant crashing of Matt's voice. Then there was silence. Their gigantic protector, having dumped them unceremoniously into the grass of Morton's Grove, had ushered them squarely into the start of their insane adventure. From now on their fate belonged to them alone.

# Chapter 4

## The Raid

Bewilderedly, they looked around them.

Ahead of them, barely to be seen for the trunks of giant trees intervening, was a smoothly-rounded mountain. Majestic and aloof it soared, dwarfing all near it—the tertiary which, yesterday, had been but waist-high. There was their eventual goal; but meanwhile their immediate surroundings roused their greater interest—and all their alertness!

When Dennis had said they would find a common grass plot a wild and exotic jungle, he had spoken perhaps more truly than he knew. At any rate, the jungle they now found themselves in was something to exceed man's wildest dreams.

Far over their heads towered a wilderness of trees. But such trees! Without branches, shooting up and over in graceful, tangling curves, their trunks oddly flat and ribbonlike and yellow-green. It was impossible to look on them as grass stems.

Here and there the trees had fallen, presenting a tangled wilderness of leathery, five-foot-wide strips. Webs of roots, tough and gnarled, whitish in color, curled in all directions to catch the feet and baffle the eye. It was an appalling underbrush. And it was an underbrush, moreover, in which there was plenty of wild life!

A hairy, pulpy thing, reddish in color, with gauzy wings and a myriad flashing eyes scuttled close to them as though drawn by curiosity to inspect them. As big as an eagle it appeared to them; both grasped their spears; but soon, with a wild whistle of its wings, it rose up through the tangle of underbrush and hummed off. A fruit fly.

And now a monstrous thing appeared far off, to stalk like a balloon on twenty-foot legs in their direction. With incredible quickness it loomed over them. Six feet through, its body was roughly spherical, and carried



on those amazingly long, jointed legs. It stared at them with beady, cruel eyes, but finally teetered on its way again, leaving them untouched.

"I'll never again be able to see a daddy longlegs without shivering," said Jim. His voice was unconsciously sunk to little more than a whisper. This was a world of titanic dangers and fierce alarms. Instinct cautioned both of them to make no more noise than necessary. "We had better make for your termitary at once."

Dennis had been thinking that for some time. But he had been unable to locate a termite tunnel anywhere. Matt had been supposed to set them down near one. No doubt, to his own mind, he *had* placed them near one of the termite highways. But his ideas of distance were now so radically different from theirs that Dennis, at least, was unable to see a tunnel opening anywhere.

He spoke his thoughts to Jim. "There must be a tunnel opening somewhere very near us," he concluded. "But I—Good heavens!"

Both crouched in wary alarm, spears held for a thrust, if necessary, at the frightful thing approaching them from the near jungle.

Thirty feet long, it was, and six feet through, a blunt-ended, untapered serpent that glistened a moist crimson color in the rays of the sun. The trees quaked and rocked as it brushed against them in its deliberate advance. Dead leaves many feet across and too heavy for the combined efforts of both men to have budged, were pushed lightly this way and that as the monster moved. The very ground seemed to shake under its appalling weight.

"If *that* comes after us," breathed Jim, "we're through!"

But now Denny drew a long breath of relief.

"Be still," he said. "Make no sound, and no move, and it will probably pass us by. It's blind, and couldn't harm us in any way—unless it rolled on us."

The two stood motionless while the nightmare serpent crashed by. Then, with the earthworm fading into the distance, they resumed their hunt for the near tunnel entrance.

Jim, whose eyes were more accustomed to searching jungle depths, finally saw it—a black hole leading down into a small hill about two hundred yards ahead of them. He pointed.

"There we are. Come on."

Laboriously they set out toward it. Laboriously because at every step some almost insuperable hurdle barred their way. A fallen grass stalk was a problem; sometimes they had to curve back on their tracks for sixty or eighty feet in order to get around it. A dead leaf, drifted there from the trees near at hand, was almost a calamity, necessitating more circuitous maneuvering.

With every yard the realization of the stark peril that was now theirs increased.

A grasshopper, blundering to the ground within a rod of them, nearly crushed them with its several tons of weight. A bumblebee, as big as a flying elephant and twice as deadly, roared around them for several minutes as though debating whether or not to attack them, and finally roared off leaving them shaken and pale. But the most startling and narrow of their narrow escapes occurred an instant after that.

They had paused for an instant, alert but undecided, to stare at a coldly glaring spider that was barring their path. It was a small spider, barely more than waist-high. But something in its malevolent eyes made the two men hesitate about attacking it. At the same time it was squatting in the only clear path in sight, with tangles of stalks and leaves on either side. A journey around the ferocious brute might be a complicated, long-drawn-out affair.

Their problem was decided for them.

Overhead, suddenly roared out a sound such as might have been made by a tri-motored Fokker. There was a flash of yellow. The roar increased to an ear-shattering scream. Something swooped so breathlessly and at the same time so ponderously that the men were knocked flat by the hurricane of disturbed air.

A fleeting struggle ensued between some vast yellow body and the unfortunate spider. Then the spider, suddenly as immobile as a lump of stone, was drawn up into the heavens by the roaring yellow thing, and disappeared. A wasp had struck, and had obtained another meal.

"Thank God that thing had a one-track mind, and was concentrating on the spider," said Jim, with a rather humorless laugh.

Dennis was silent. He was beginning to realize that he knew too much about insects for his peace of mind. To Jim, insects had always heretofore been something to brush away or step on, as the circumstance might

indicate. He had no idea, for example, of exactly what fate it was he had just missed. But Denny knew all about it.

He knew that if the wasp had chosen either of them, the chosen one would have felt a stabbing thing like a red-hot sword penetrate to his vitals. He knew that swift paralysis would have followed the thrust. He knew that then the victim would have been taken back, helpless and motionless as the spider was, to be laid side by side with other helpless but still conscious victims in the fetid depths of the wasp's nest. And he knew that finally an egg would have been laid on the victim's chest; an egg that would eventually hatch and deliver a bit of life that would calmly and leisurely devour the paralyzed food supply alive.

"Let's hurry," he suggested, glancing up to see if any more wasps were hovering about.

The lowering tunnel mouth was very near now. Barely twenty yards away. What with the crowding monsters around them, the tunnel began to look like a haven. Almost at a run, they continued toward it.

Then a commotion like that which might be made by a mighty army sounded in the underbrush behind them. Dennis looked back over his shoulder.

"Hurry!" he gasped, suddenly accelerating his pace into frank flight. "Ants... ."

Jim glanced back, too—and joined Denny in his flight. Pouring toward them at express train speed, flinging aside fallen stalks, climbing over obstructions as though no obstructions were there, was coming a grim and armored horde. Far in the lead, probably the one that had seen the men first and started the deadly chase, was a single ant.

The solitary leader was a monster of its kind. As tall as Jim, clashing in its horny armor, it rushed toward the fugitives.

"It's going to reach the tunnel before we do," Jim panted. "We've got to kill the thing—and do it before the rest get to us... ."

The monster was on them. Blindly, ferociously it hurled its bulk at the things that smelled like termites however little they resembled them. The termite-paste was, in this instance, the most deadly of challenges.

Jim stepped to the fore, with his spear point slanted to receive the onslaught, spear butt grounded at his feet.

Whether the six-legged horror would have had wit enough to comprehend the nature of the defense offered, and would have striven to circumvent it, had time been given it, is a question that will never be answered. For the thing wasn't given the time.

In mid-air it seemed to writhe and try to change the direction of its leap. But it was on the point and had transfixed itself before its intelligence, however keen, could have functioned.

The fight, though, was by no means over. With five feet of steel piercing it through, it whirled with hardly abated vitality toward Dennis. Its gargoyle head came close and closer.

Dennis sprang sideways along its length, lifted the pointed bar he held, and dashed it down on what looked to him a vital spot—the unbelievably slender trunk that held its spatulate abdomen to its armored chest.

There was a crack as the bar smashed down on the weak point. The monster sank quivering to the ground. An instant later it was up, but now its movements were dazed and sluggish as it dragged its half-paralyzed abdomen after it, and fumbled and caught on the heavy bar that transfixed it.

Jim caught the bar and tugged it. "My spear!" he cried. "Denny—help!"

Together the two wrenched to jerk the spear loose from the horny armor of the dying ant. The rest of the pack were very near now.

"We'll have to let it go... ." panted Denny.

But at that instant their desperate efforts tore it loose from the convulsively jerking hulk. They darted into the tunnel mouth with the racing horde scarcely twenty yards behind them.

Without hesitation the ants poured in after them. Jim and Dennis leaped forward, in pitch darkness, now and then bumping heavily against a wall as the tunnel turned, but having at least no trouble with their footing: the floor was as smooth as though man-made.

Behind them they could hear the armored horde crashing along in the blackness. The smashing noise of their progress was growing louder. The two had run perhaps fifty yards in the darkness. Another fifty, and they would be caught!

But now, just as their eyes—sharpened also by the danger they were in—began to grow accustomed to the gloom, they saw ahead of them a thing that might have stepped straight out of a horrible dream.

Six feet of vulnerable, unarmored body, amply protected by horny head and shoulders and ten feet of awful, scissor-mandibles, faced them. The creature was doing a strange sort of war dance, swaying its terrible bulk back and forth rhythmically, while its feet remained immovable. An instant it did this, then it charged at the two men. Simultaneously the crashing of the fierce horde behind sounded with appalling nearness—the noise and odor of the ants preventing the huge termite guard in front of the men from recognizing and approving the smell of the termite-paste that covered their bodies.

"Follow me!" snapped Denny, remembering that the hideous attacking thing before them was blind, and gaining from that knowledge swift inspiration.

Jim gathered his muscles to follow at command. But he almost shouted aloud as he saw Denny leap—straight toward the enormous, snapping mandibles.

In an instant, however, Denny's idea was made clear. With a slide that would have done credit to any baseball player, the entomologist catapulted on his chest past the snapping peril. Jim followed, with not a foot to spare. They were not past the soft rear-parts of the thing, but they were at least past its horrible jaws. And before the monster could turn its unwieldy bulk in the tunnel, the ants were upon it.

For a few seconds, blinded to their own danger by the fascination of the struggle going on before them, the two men witnessed the grim watcher of the tunnel as it drove back wave after wave of attacking ants.

Two at a time, the invaders charged that wall of living horn. And two at a time they were swept against the walls, or slashed in two by the enormous mandibles. One against an army; but it was a full minute or so before the one began to weaken.

"Come," whispered Dennis, at last. "If what I think is going to happen occurs, this will be no place for us."

They went ahead, with the din of battle dying behind them, till they saw a small tunnel branching off beside the main stem. Into this they

squeezed. But as Jim started to go farther down its constricted length, Dennis stopped him.

"We're fairly safe here, I think. We'll stay and watch... ."

Silently, motionless, they lurked in the entrance of the side-avenue, and peered out at the main avenue they had just left. And now that avenue began to buzz with traffic.

First, more of the horrors with the enormous scissor-mandibles began to stream past them. In twos and threes, then in whole squads, they lumbered by, bound for the ant army that had invaded their sanctum.

Not quite too far ahead to be out of sight, the defenders halted. Several of their number went forward to help the dying Horatius. The rest lined up in a triple row across a wide patch in the tunnel, presenting a phalanx it would appear that nothing could beat.

"How do they know enough to gather here from distant parts of this hollow mountain?" whispered Jim to Denny. "How do they know their city is besieged just at this spot, and that their help is needed?"

Dennis shrugged. His eyes were shining. This was the kind of thing he had come here for. This unhampered observation of a strange and terrible race at war and at work—it was well worth all the personal risks he might run.

"No man can answer your question, Jim. They're blind—they can't see their danger so as to know how to combat it. They couldn't hear, and be alarmed by, the vibrations of battle for a distance of more than a few yards. My only guess is that they are constantly and silently commanded by the unknown intelligence, the ruling brain, that hides deep in the earth beneath us and directs these 'soldier' termites in some marvelous way—though itself never seeing or hearing the actual dangers it guards against."

"The queen?" suggested Jim.

Again Denny shrugged. "Who knows? She might be the brains, as well as the egg layer, of the tribe. But don't talk too much. The vibration of our voices might lead them to us in spite of their blindness."

Now the main avenue before them was humming with a new kind of traffic. From side to side it was being filled with a new sort of termite. These were smaller than the soldiers, and entirely unprotected by either horn armor plate or slashing mandibles.

Each of these carried an unwieldy block of gleaming substance. And each in turn dropped its block in a growing wall behind the savage defenders against the ants, and fastened it in place with a thick and viscous brown liquid that dried almost immediately into a kind of cement.

"The workers," whispered Dennis, enthralled. "The building blocks are half-digested wood. The cement is a sort of stuff that exudes from their own bodies. In ten minutes there will be a wall across the tunnel that no ants on earth could penetrate!"

"But the home guards, the brave lads and all that sort of thing, will be shut off on the outside of the wall with the enemy. And there are hundreds of the enemy," protested Jim.

"A necessary sacrifice," said Denny. "And so perfect is their organization that no one, including the soldiers to be sacrificed, ever makes any objection."

Jim shivered a little. "It's terrible, somehow. It's—it's inhuman!"

"Naturally. It's insectian, if there is such a word. And a wise man once predicted that the termite organization, being so much more perfect a one than man's, indicated the kind of society man would at some time build up for himself. In ten or twelve more centuries we, too, might go off in millions and deliberately starve to death because the ruling power decided there were too many people on earth. We, too, might devour our dead because it was essential not to let anything go to waste. We, too, might control our births so that we produced astronomers with telescopes in their heads instead of regular eyes, carpenters with hammer and saw instead of hands, soldiers with poison gas sacs in their chests so they could breathe death and destruction at will. It would be the perfect state of society."

"Maybe—but I'm glad I'll be dead before that times comes," said Jim with another shiver.

By now the wall ahead of them was complete. On the other side of it the soldier termites stolidly fought on to their certain death. On the near side, the workers retreated to unknown depths in the great hollow mountain behind them. The main avenue was once more clear, and, save for a few workers hastening on unknown errands, deserted.

"That act's over," sighed Dennis. "But it may well be no more than a curtain raiser to the acts to come. Shall we be on our way? We're hardly on the fringe of the termitary yet—and I want to get at the heart of it, and

into the depths far beneath it. Depths of hell, we'll probably find them, Jim. But a marvelous hell, and one no man has ever before seen."

They left their little haven and moved along the main tunnel toward the heart of the termitary, walking easily upright in this tunnel which was only one of many hundreds in the vast, hollowed mountain—which loomed into the outer sunshine to almost a height of a yard.



# Chapter 5

## Trapped

On along the tunnel they went. And as they progressed, Dennis got the answer to something that had troubled him a great deal before their entrance here—a problem which had been solved, rather amazingly, of itself.

Termitaries, as far as the entomologist knew, were pitch-black places which no ray of light ever entered. He had been afraid he would be forced to stumble blindly in unlit depths, able to see nothing at all, on a par with the blind creatures among whom he moved. Yet he and Jim could see in this subterranean labyrinth.

He observed now the reason for that. The walls on all sides, made of half-digested cellulose, had rotted just enough through long years to be faintly phosphorescent. And that simple natural fact was probably going to mean all the difference between life and death: it gave the two men at least the advantage of sight over the eyeless savage creatures among whom, helped by the termite-smell given by the paste, they hoped to glide unnoticed.

However, even the termite-paste, and the fact that the termitary citizens were blind, didn't seem enough to account for the immunity granted the two men as they began to come presently to more crowded passages and tunnels near the center of the mound.

On every side of them now, requiring the utmost in agility to keep from actually brushing against them, were hordes of the worker termites, and dozens of the frightful soldiers. Yet on the two men moved, ever more slowly, without one of the monsters attempting to touch them. It was odd—almost uncanny.

"Surely the noise of our walking, tiptoe as we may, must be heard by them—and noted as different from theirs," whispered Dennis. "Yet they pay no attention to us. If it is due to the paste, I must say it's wonderful stuff!"

Jim nodded in a puzzled way. "It's almost as if they wanted to make our inward path easy. I wonder—if it's going to be different when we try to get out again!"

Dennis was wondering that, too. It seemed absurd to suspect the things of being intelligent enough to lay traps. But it did look almost as though they were encouraging their two unheard-of visitors from another world to go on deeper and deeper into the heart of the eerie city (all the tunnels sloped down now), there perhaps to meet with some ghastly imprisonment.

He gave it up. Sufficient for the moment that they were unmolested, and that he had a chance at first hand to make observations more complete than the world of entomology had ever dreamed of.

They stumbled onto what seemed a death struggle between one of the giant soldiers and an inoffensive-looking worker. The drab, comparatively feeble body of the worker was wriggling right in the center of the great claws which, with a twitch, could have sliced it in two endwise. Yet the jaws did not twitch; and in a few moments the worker drew unconcernedly out and moved away.

"The soldier was getting his meal," whispered Denny, enthralled. "Their mandibles are enlarged so enormously that they can't feed themselves. The workers, who digest food for the whole tribe, feed them regularly. Then if a soldier gets in the least rebellious, he can simply be starved to death at any time."

"Ugh!" Jim whispered back. "Fancy being official stomach to three or four other people! More of your wonderful 'organization,' I suppose."

They went on, down and down, till Denny calculated they had at last reached nearly to the center of the vast city. And now they stumbled into something weird and wonderful indeed. Rather, they half fell into it, for it lay down a few feet and came as a complete surprise in the dimness; and not till they had recovered from their near fall and looked around for a few seconds did they realize where their last few steps—the last few steps of freedom they were to have in the grim underground kingdom—had taken them.

They were in a chamber so huge that it made the largest of man-made domes shrink to insignificance by comparison.

A hundred yards or more in every direction, it extended. And far overhead, lost in distance, reared the arched roof. A twenty-story building could have been placed under that roof without trouble.

Lost in awe, Dennis gazed about him; and he saw on the floor, laid in orderly rows in countless thousands, that which gave further cause for wonderment: new-hatched larvae about the size of pumpkins but a sickly white in color—feeble, helpless blobs of life that one day develop into soldiers and workers, winged rulers or police. The termite nursery.

"Whew!" gasped Jim, wiping his face. "From the heat in here you'd think we were getting close to the real, old-fashioned hell instead of an artificial, insect-made one. What are all these nauseating-looking blobs of lard lying about here, anyway?"

Denny told him. "Which is the reason for the heat," he concluded. "Jim, it's twenty degrees warmer in here than it is outdoors. How—*how*—can these insects regulate the temperature like that? The work of the ruling brain again? But where, and what, can that brain be?"

"Maybe we'll find out before we leave this place," said Jim, more prophetically than he knew. "Hello—we can't get out through the door we entered. We'll have to find another exit. Look."

Dennis looked. In the doorway they had just come through was a soldier—a giant even among giants. Its ten-foot jaws, like a questing, gigantic vise, were opening and closing regularly and rapidly across the opening of the portal. It made no attempt to enter the great nursery, just stood where it was and sliced the air rhythmically with its jaws.

"We haven't a chance of walking through *that* exit!" Dennis agreed. "Let's try the other side."

But before they could half cross the great room—walking between rows of life that weakly stirred like protoplasmic mud on either side of them—a soldier appeared at that door, too. Like the first, it stationed itself there, and began the same regular, swift slicing movements of jaws that compassed the doorway from side to side and halfway from top to bottom.

"We might possibly be able to run through that giant's nut-cracker before it smashed shut on us," said Jim dubiously. "But I'd hate to try it. There's a door at the end, too."

They made for this, running now. But a third soldier appeared to block the way out with those deadly, clashing mandibles.

"You're *sure* they can't see?" demanded Jim, clutching his spear while he hesitated whether to try an attack on the fearful guard or to turn tail again. "Because they certainly act as if they did!"

"Direct commands from the ruling brain," Denny surmised soberly. "Somewhere, perhaps half a mile down in the earth, Something is able to see us through solid walls, read in our minds our intentions of what we're to do next, and send out wordless commands to these soldiers to execute countermoves."

"Rot!" said Jim testily. "These things are bugs, not supermen. And the fact that they're now bigger than we are, and much better armed, doesn't keep them from being just bugs. There's no real brain-power in evidence here."

But an instant later he changed his mind. They approached the fourth and last exit from the giant chamber. And here there was no guard. They were able to race out of it without interference. The oddity of that was glaring.

"Denny," gasped Jim, "we're being *herded!* Driven in a certain direction, and for a certain reason, by these damned things! Do you realize that?"

Dennis did realize it. And a moment later, when he glanced behind, he realized it more.

Behind them, marching in orderly twos that filled the tunnel from side to side, moved a body of the soldiers. As the men moved, they moved; never coming nearer and never dropping behind.

Experimentally, Dennis stopped. The grim soldiers stopped, too. Dennis walked back toward them a step or two, spear held ready.

The monsters did not try to attack. On the other hand they did not give ground, either; and as Denny got to within a few yards of them, one in the front line suddenly opened and shut his ponderous jaws.

They clashed together a matter of inches from Denny's torso—a clear warning to get on back in the direction he had come.

Jim came and stood beside him, heavy shoulder muscles bunched into knots, standing on the balls of his feet as a boxer stands before flashing in at an opponent.

"Shall we have it out with them here and now?" said Jim, his jaws set. "We wouldn't have a chance—but I'm beginning to get awfully doubtful about the fate these things have in store for us. I can't even guess at what

it may be—but I've an idea it may be a lot worse than a quick, easy death!"

Denny shook his head. "Let's see it through," he muttered, looking at the nightmare jaws of their guard. Two sweeps of those jaws and he and Jim would lie in halves.

They started back down the corridor, the monstrous shepherds moving as they did. The way descended so steeply now that it was difficult for them to keep their footing. Then, yards below the level of the horrible nursery, the tunnel narrowed—and widened again into a chamber which had no other opening save the one they were being herded into. A blind end to the passageway.

"The bug Bastille," said Jim with a mirthless grin. "Here, I guess, we're going to wait for the powers-that-be to judge us and give us our sentence."

The giant soldiers halted. Two of them stood in the narrowed part of the tunnel, one behind the other, blocking it with a double, living barrier. Their jaws commenced moving regularly, savagely back and forth, open and closed. Blind these guards might be; but no living thing, even though it bristled with eyes, could creep out unscathed through the animated threshing machine those jaws made of that doorway. The two men were more securely held in their prison cell than they would have been by two-inch doors of nickel-steel. They could only wait there, helpless prisoners, to learn the intentions of the unknown Something that ruled the great city, and that held them so easily in its grasp.

# Chapter 6

## In the Food Room

Restlessly, Jim paced back and forth in the narrow dank cell. At the doorway the two guards opened and closed their jaws, regularly, rhythmically, about sixty to the minute. Hours, the two men calculated, they had been there. And still the clashing of those jaws rang steadily, maddeningly in their ears.

Clash-clash-clash. The things seemed as tireless as machinery. Clash-clash-clash. And into that savage, tireless movement, Denny read a sort of longing refrain.

"Try—to—es—cape! Try—to—es—cape!"

He shivered. At any time, did he and Jim grow too fearful of the dark future or too nerve-wracked by the terrific suspense, they could step into these gigantic, steel-hard jaws. But to be sliced in two ...

Jim stopped his pacing, and stared speculatively at the wall of their cell. For the dozenth time he raised his ponderous spear and thrust the pointed end at the wall with all his strength. And for the dozenth time he was rewarded only by seeing a flake no larger than his clenched fist fall out.

"Might as well be cement!" he rasped. "God, we're caught like flies in a spiderweb!"

"Well, you wanted excitement," remarked Dennis, a bit acidly. The strain was telling on him more than on the less finely strung Holden; but he was struggling to keep himself in hand.

"So I did want excitement," said Jim. "But I want at least a sporting chance for my white-alley, too. But—"

He stopped; and both stared swiftly toward the door.

The ponderous, gruesome clashing of jaws had stopped. The two nightmare guards stood motionless, as though at command. Then they moved into the cell, straight toward the two men.

"It's come!" said Jim through set teeth. He swung his spear up, ready to shoot it at the horny breastplate of the nearest monster with all his puny strength. "We're going to catch it now!"

But Dennis gazed more intently; and he saw that the blind but ferocious creatures showed no real signs of molesting them. Instead, they were edging to one side. In a moment, as the two men moved warily to keep their distance, they found suddenly that the soldiers were behind them, and that the doorway was free to them.

The glimpse of freedom, however, was not inspiring. The meaning of the move was too apparent: they were again being herded.

Whatever reigning power it was that had let them penetrate so deeply into the trap, and then had surrounded and imprisoned them—was now going to honor them with an audience.

"His Majesty commands," commented Jim, reading the sinister gesture as clearly as Denny had. "I'll wager we're about to meet your 'unknown intelligence,' Denny. But be it 'super-termite' or be it Queen—whatever it may be—I want just one chance to use this spear of mine!"

Reluctantly he stepped forth before the fearful guard; reluctantly, but in full command of his nerves now that the wearing inactivity was ended and something definite was about to happen. Which proves but once again the wisdom of the gods in not allowing man to read the future. For could Jim Holden have foreseen the precise experience awaiting them, his nerve control—and Denny's, too—might not have been so firm.

Again their way led sharply down, through tunnels loftier and broader and glowing more brilliantly with phosphorescence which was a testimonial to their greater age.

The efficiency of their herding was perfect. At each side entrance along the way stood one of the ghastly soldiers, jaws clashing with monotonous deadliness. Now and again several of the monsters appeared straight ahead, barring the avenue, and leaving no choice but to turn to right or left into off-branching tunnels. Small chance here of missing the path! And always behind them marched their two particular guards, closing off their retreat.

"How do you suppose they sense our approach?" wondered Jim, who had noticed that the menacing jaw-clashing began while they were still fairly far from whatever side entrance was being barred to them. And again: "You're *sure* they can't see?"

"There isn't an eye in the lot of them," said Denny. "They must sense our coming by the vibration of our footsteps."

But when they tried tiptoeing, on noiseless bare feet, the result was the same. Surely the things could not hear them for more than a few feet; yet with no sound to guide them, the blind guards commenced automatically opening and closing those invulnerable jaws with the distant approach of the two men just the same. They could only ascribe it to the same force that seemed able to follow them, step by step and thought by thought, though it was far away and out of sight—the ruling brain of the termite tribe.

Ever hotter it grew as they descended, till at length a blast of heat like a draft from a furnace met them as they rounded a corner and stepped into a corridor that no longer led downward. They knew that they were very near the ruler's lair now, on the lowest level, deep in the foundations of the vast pile.

Dennis wiped perspiration, caused as much by emotion as by heat, from his face. He alone of all students on earth was going to penetrate the very heart of the termite mystery. He alone was going to have at least a glimpse of the baffling intelligence that science had guessed about for so many decades He ... alone. For it was hardly likely that he would ever get back up to the surface of earth to share his knowledge.

How different was this adventure from what he had hoped it might be! He had thought that the two of them might simply enter the termitary, mingle—perilously, but with at least a margin of safety—with the blind race it housed, and walk out again whenever they pleased. But from the moment of entering they'd had no chance. They had been hopelessly in the clutch of the insects; played with, indulged, and finally trapped, to be led at last like dogs on a leash to the lair of the ruling power.

They rounded another corner and now, ahead of them, they saw what must be the end of this last and deepest of all the tunnels. This end showed as a glare of light. Real light, not the soft gleam of the rotting wood walls which was already paling feebly in comparison. The glare ahead of them, indeed, had something of the texture of electric light.



Neither Jim nor Dennis could repress a sudden start; it was like coming abruptly onto a man-made fact, a bit of man-made world in the midst of this insect hell.

The damp heat was almost paralyzing now. Their limbs felt weak as they stumbled toward the light. But they were inexorably herded forward, and soon were at the threshold of the oddly illuminated chamber.

Now the two stopped for an instant and sniffed, as a peculiar odor came to their nostrils. It was a vague but fearsome odor, indescribable, making their skin crawl. A smell of decay—of death—and yet somehow of rank and fetid life. A combination of charnel-house and menagerie smell.

Denny blanched as an inkling of what was before them came to his mind. He remembered the swooping wasp, that had so narrowly missed them at the start of their adventure. The wasp, he knew, was not the only insect that had certain dread ways of stocking its larder and keeping the contents of that larder fresh! The termites did not customarily follow these practises. Yet—yet the odor coming from the place before them certainly suggested ... But he tried to thrust such apprehensions from his thoughts.

They entered the chamber. The two gigantic soldiers stopped on the threshold behind them and took up their standard guard attitudes. The men stared about them... .

It was huge, this chamber, almost as huge as the nursery chamber they had blundered into. The source of the light was not apparent. It seemed to glow from walls and floor and ceiling, as though it were a box of glass with sunshine pouring in at all six sides.

And now horror began to mingle with awed interest, as they took in more comprehensively the sights in that place, and saw precisely what it contained.

Denny's apprehensions had been only too well founded. For larder, food storeroom, the chamber certainly was. But what a storeroom! And in what state the "food" that stocked it was!

All along the vast floor were laid rows of inert, fantastic bodies. Insects. The whole small-insect world seemed to be represented here. One or more of everything that crawled, flew, walked or bored, seemed gathered in this great room. Grubs, flies, worms, ants, things soft and

slimy and things grim and armored, were piled side by side like cordwood.

These hulks, nearly all larger than the two quarter-inch men, lay stark and motionless where they had been dropped. From them came the odor that had stopped Jim and Denny on the threshold—the strange odor of blended life and death. And the reason for the queer odor became apparent as the two gazed more closely at the motionless hulks.

These things, like figures out of a delirium in their great size and exaggerated frightfulness, were rigid as in death—but they were nevertheless not dead! Helpless as so many lumps of stone, they were still horribly, pitifully alive. Paralyzed, in some inscrutable termite fashion, probably fully conscious of their surroundings, they could only lie there and wait for their turn to come to be devoured by the ferocious creatures that had dragged them down to this, the bowels of the mound city.

Besides these things bound in the rigidity of death, there was more normal life. There were termites in that vast storeroom, too; but they were specialized creatures, such as termitary life abounds in, that were so distorted as to be hardly recognizable as termites.

Along one wall of the place, hanging head down and fastened there for life, was a row of worker termites whose function was obviously that of reservoirs: their abdomens, so enormously distended as to be nearly transparent, glistened in varying colors to indicate that they contained various liquids whose purpose could only be guessed at.

Living cisterns, never to move, never to know life even in the monotonous, joyless way of the normal worker, they hung there to be dipped into whenever the master that reigned over this inferno, or his immediate underlings, desired some of their contents!

In addition, there were several each of two forms of termite soldier such as they had not seen before, standing rigidly at attention about the place.

At the door, of course, were the two creatures with the enormous mandibles that had escorted the pigmy men to the larder. But these others were as different as though they belonged to a different race.

Three had heads that were hideously bulbous in form, and which were flabby and elastic instead of armored with thick horn as were the heads of the usual soldiers. Like living syringes, these heads were;

perambulating bulbs filled with some defensive or offensive liquid to be squirted out at the owner's will.

The third kind of soldier was represented in the spectacle of termites with heads that were huge and conical, resembling bungs, or the tapered cylindrical corks with which one plugs a bottle. These, Denny knew from his studies, had been evolved by termite biology for the purpose of temporarily stopping up any breach in termitary mound-wall or tunnel while the workers could assemble and repair the chink with more solid and permanent building material.

But how fantastically, gruesomely different these colossal figures looked, here in the deepest stronghold of termitedom, than as scurrying little insects viewed under an entomologist's glass! And how appallingly different was the viewpoint from which they were now being observed—here where the human observers were equal in size, and doomed at any moment perhaps to be paralyzed and piled with the helpless live things that made up the rest of the "larder"!

And the presiding genius of this mysterious, underground store-room—where was it? Denny and Jim looked about over the rows of live food, and among the termite soldiers with their odd heads, in vain for a creature that might conceivably be the super-insect that so omnipotently ruled the mound.

Off in a corner they saw two more termites—standard worker types, standing motionless side by side, with a queer sort of mushroom growth linking them together—a large, gray-white ball borne mutually on their backs. But that was all. The listing of those two workers concluded the roll-call of termites in the chamber as far as the two men could see. And the two were—just ordinary workers.

"I guess His Majesty is out," said Jim. But his voice, in spite of the attempted levity of the words, was low-pitched and somber. "Most impolite to keep us waiting—"

He stopped as Denny sharply threw up his hand. And he too gazed at the maneuver that had caught Denny's wary attention.

This was nothing save that the various soldiers in the chamber—seven of them, besides the two that never left their stations at the door—had moved. But they had moved in concert, almost as harmoniously in unison as if performing some sort of drill.

In a single line they filed across the rows of inert, palpitating, paralyzed bodies; and in a line they surrounded Jim and Denny in a hollow square about twenty feet across. There they took up their stations, the three soldiers with the syringe-heads, and the four with the unwieldy craniums that resembled bungs.

So perfectly had the move been executed, so perfectly and in unison had it been timed, that there could be little doubt it had resulted from a direct order. But where was the thing to give the command? Where was the head-general? In some far place, on his way to inspect the new and odd kind of prisoners, and giving orders to hold them yet more closely in anticipation of that inspection?

Jim turned to Denny and started to voice some of his thoughts. But the words were killed by the light that had appeared suddenly in Denny's eyes. In them had appeared a gleam of almost superstitious terror.

"Jim!" gasped Denny, raising his hand and pointing with trembling forefinger. "Jim—*look!*"

Jim turned to gaze, and his spear, clutched with almost convulsive desperation till this moment, sagged to the floor from his limp hinds.

The thing Denny had pointed at was the curious, large mushroom growth supported jointly on the backs of the two worker termites. It had been across the chamber from them when they first saw it. Now it was moving toward them, steadily, borne by the team of workers. And now, clearly, for the first time, they saw what it really was.

It was a head, that mushroom growth. Rather, the whitish-gray, soft-looking thing was a brain. For it had long ago burst free of the original insect skull casing in which it had been born. Evidence that it had once been a normal, termite head was given by the fact that here and there, on sides and top of the huge, spongy-looking mass, were brownish scales—fragments of the casing that had once contained its bulk.

Set low down under the sphere, with the whitish-gray mass beetling up over them like a curving cliff, were eyes; great, staring, dull things of the type termites have during the short-winged periods of their existences. Like huge round stones, those eyes regarded the two men as the team of termites marched closer.

Hanging down from the great mass was an abortive miniature of a body—soft, shriveled abdomen, almost nonexistent chest, and tiny, stick-like legs that trailed helplessly along the floor as the termites—in the

manner of two men who support a helpless third man between them—bore it forward.

Here, then was the Intellect that ruled the tribe, the super-termite, the master mind of the mound! This travesty of a termite! This thing with wasted limbs and torso, and with enormous, voracious brain that drained all sustenance constantly from the body! It was, in the insect world, a parallel to the dream that present-day Man sometimes has of Man a million years in the future: a thing all head and staring eyes, with a brain so enlarged that it must be artificially supported on its flabby torso.

"I guess His Majesty is out," Jim had said, with a shaky attempt at lightness.

But he now realized his mistake. His Majesty hadn't been out. His Majesty had been with them all along—a four-foot, irregular sphere of grayish-white nerve matter and intricately wrinkled cortex dependent for movement on borrowed backs and legs—and was now peering at them out of the only pair of eyes in the termitary as though in doubt as to what to do first with his helpless-seeming captives.

## "Clinging Brown Stuff"

Bemused, appalled, the two gazed at this almost disembodied brain that held them captive. It continued to come steadily toward them, carried by its two faithful slaves; and the grotesque termite soldiers, that had closed about them in a hollow square, parted to let it through.

Such was the bewitchment of the two men as they stared at the monstrosity, that they did not hear the slight clashing of horn that accompanied a swift movement of one of the soldiers behind them.

The first thing they knew of such a movement was when they felt their arms pinioned to their sides with crushing force, and looked down to find a pair of hard, jointed forelegs coiled about their bodies. In answer to some voiceless command, one of the termites with the conical heads had approached behind them and wound a leg around each.

Sweat stood out on Denny's forehead at the repellent touch of that living bond. He turned and twisted wildly.

Jim was struggling madly in the grip of the other foreleg. Great shoulders bulging with the effort, muscles standing in knots on his heavy arms, he nearly succeeded in breaking free. Denny felt the tie that bound him relax ever so little as the monster centered its attention on the stronger man.

With a last effort, he tore his right arm free, and wriggled partly around in the thing's grip. He raised the spear and plunged it slantingly down into the hideous body.

This type of termite was armored more poorly than the others. Only its head was plated with horn; chest and abdomen were soft and vulnerable as those of any humble worker in the mound. The spear tore into it for two-thirds its length. There was a squeak—the first sound they had heard—from the wounded monster. The clutching forelegs tightened terribly, then began to loosen, quivering spasmodically as they slowly relinquished their grasp.

Denny bounded free and again sent the length of his spear into the loathsome body. Jim, meanwhile, had leaped toward his fallen spear. He stooped to pick it up—and was lost!

Obeying another wordless order, one of the ghastly, syringe-headed monsters had stepped out of line with the start of the short struggle. This one bounded on Jim just as he leaned over for his weapon.

Denny shouted a warning, started to run to his friend's aid. The dying termite, with a last burst of incredible vitality, caught his leg and held him.

In an instant it was done. The termite with the distorted head had drenched Jim with a brown, thick liquid that covered him from shoulder to feet—and Jim was writhing helplessly on the floor.

Denny burst loose at last from the feebly clutching foreleg. He straightened, poised his spear, and with a strength born of near madness shot it at the syringe-headed thing's chest.

But this one was different, armored to the full save for its soft cranium. The steel bar glanced harmlessly from the heavy horn breastplate. In answer, the monster wheeled and drenched Dennis, too, with the loathsome liquid.

On the instant Dennis was helpless. As Jim had done, he sank to the floor, his body constricted in a sheath that tightened as it dried and which bound him as securely as any straitjacket might have done.

The two rolled on the floor, trying to shed the terrible coating of hardening fluid that contracted about them. But they were as impotent as two flies that had rolled in the sticky slime of some super-flypaper. At last they gave it up.

Panting, helpless as mummies, they glared up at the stony eyes of the ruler-termite. The team of workers moved, bearing their burden of almost bodiless, mushroom brain like well-oiled machines.

Their forelegs went out. The two men were shoved along the floor ahead of the monarch—and were laid in one of the lines of paralyzed insects so patently held as the ruler's private food supply!

The great, stony eyes were next bent, as though in curiosity, on the spears that had done such damage to the termite with the conical head. In the true insect world there was no such phenomenon as those

glittering steel bars; and it appeared that the over-developed brain of the monarch held questions concerning their nature.

The team of termites wheeled, and walked over to the nearest spear, trailing the feeble, atrophied legs of their rider as they went. They squatted close to the floor, and the staring eyes examined the spears at close range. Then the owner of the eyes apparently sent out another command; for one of the guards at the door left its post and drew near, scissor-mandibles opened in obedience.

The hard mandible's clashed over one of the steel bars. The jaws crunched shut, with a nerve-rasping grind. They made, naturally, no impression on the bar. The guard retired to its post at the doorway.

The termite-ruler seemed to think this over, for a moment. Then at some telepathic order, its two bearers picked up the spear and carried it, and their physically helpless ruler, over to one of the living cisterns—one filled with a dark red liquid.

One of the beasts of burden reached up and thrust an end of the spear into the hugely distended abdomen filled with the unknown red liquid. The spear was withdrawn, with about a foot of its blunt end reddened by the fluid. The termite laid it down; the staring, dull eyes watched it...

Slowly the end of the bar dulled with swift oxidation; slowly it turned brownish and flaked away, almost entirely consumed. The acid—if that was what the red stuff was—was awesomely powerful, at least with inorganic substances.

The termite team turned away from the bar, as if it were now a matter of indifference to the bloated brain borne on their backs. It approached the men again.

"I suppose," groaned Jim, "that our turn is next. The thing will probably have us dipped into the red stuff, to see if we're consumed, too."

But here His Majesty's curiosity was interrupted while he partook of nourishment.

The clashing jaws of the two termite soldiers at the door stopped for a moment. Jim and Dennis struggled to turn their heads—all of them they could move—to see what the cessation of jaw-clashing might mean.

Three worker termites squeezed past. They approached one of the line of paralyzed insect hulks, and sank their mandibles into a garden slug.



They tugged at this until they had it under the live cistern of red liquid into which the spear had been thrust.

One of the three flicked drops of the reddish stuff onto the inert slug, till it was well sprinkled. Then they dragged the carcass back to the termite-ruler.

They got it there barely in time. In a matter of seconds after they had dropped it before the monarch, the slug had collapsed into a half-liquid puddle of decomposed protoplasm on the floor. One of the main functions—if not *the* main function—of the red acid, it seemed, was to act as a powerful digestive juice for His Majesty's food, predigesting it before it was taken into the feeble body for nourishment.

The termite team settled down over the semi-liquid mess that had been the slug, and tilted back. Now, under the huge globe of the brain, Jim and Denny saw exposed a small, soft mouth fringed by the tiny rudiments of atrophied mandibles. The repulsive little mouth touched the acid-softened mass... .

The withered abdomen filled out. The whitish-gray lump of brain-matter grew slightly darker. It looked as though the mass of the dead slug were as large as the total bulk of the termite ruler; but not until the meal was nearly gone did the voracious feeding stop.

The three workers that had spread the banquet before their monarch, left the chamber. The guards resumed their interrupted jaw-clashing, which seemed senseless now: the captives, though not paralyzed as were the other captives there, were held so helpless by the dried and hardened fluid that escape was out of the question.

The misshapen burden of the termite team seemed to relax a little, lethargically, as though so gorged with food as to render almost inactive the grotesquely exaggerated brain. The stony eyes became duller. Plainly the captives were to have a brief respite while the huge meal was assimilated.

"If I could get loose for just one minute," Jim took the opportunity to whisper to Denny, "and get at my spear—I think there would be one termite-ruler less in the world!"

Denny nodded. He had been thinking along the same lines as Jim: that bloated, swollen brain seemed a very vulnerable thing. Soft and boneless and formless, contained only by the dirty-white, membranous skin, it

did appear a tempting target for a spear thrust. And now, sluggish with its meal, it seemed less alert and on guard.

Jim went on with his thought.

"I think you scientists are wrong about *all* the termites having intelligence," he whispered. "I believe that thing has the only reasoning mind in the mound. Look at those two guards at the door, for instance. There's no earthly need for them to keep guard as eternally as they do. We can't even move, let alone try to escape. They're utterly brainless, commanded to guard the entrance with their mandibles, and continuing to guard it accordingly although the need for it is past."

Jim worked almost unthinkingly at his bonds. "If we could kill the wizened, little, big-headed thing, we might have a chance. There'd be nothing left to guide the tribe, no ruling power to direct them against us. We might even ... escape!"

"Through the entire city—with untold thousands of these horrible things on our trail?" objected Denny gloomily.

"But if the untold thousands were dummies, used to being directed in every move by this master brain," urged Jim, "they might just blunder around while we slipped through the lines... ."

His words trailed into silence. Escape seemed so improbable as to be hardly worth talking about. Quiet reigned for a long time.

It was broken finally by Dennis.

"Jim," he breathed suddenly, "can you see my legs?"

With difficulty Jim turned his head. "Yes," he said. "Why?"

"It seems to me I can move my left knee—just a little!"

Jim looked more closely. "By heaven!" he exclaimed. "Denny, *I think the brown stuff is cracking!* Maybe it was never intended to be more than a temporary bond, to hold an enemy helpless just long enough for it to be killed! Maybe it hardens as it dries so that it loses all resiliency! Maybe—"

He stopped. A faint quivering of the ruler's withered little legs heralded its reawakening consciousness.

"Act helpless!" whispered Denny excitedly, as he too saw that faint stir of awakening. "Don't let the thing get an idea of what we're thinking. Because ... we *might* get our moment of freedom... ."

Both lay relaxed on the floor, eyes half closed. And in the hardening substance that covered them all over like a shell of cloudy brown bakelite, appeared more minute seams as it dried unevenly on the flexible human flesh beneath it. Whether Jim's guess that it was only a temporary bond was correct, or whether it had been developed to harden relentlessly only over unyielding surfaces of horn such as the termites' deadliest enemy, the ants, wear for armor, will never be known. But in a matter of moments it became apparent that it was going to prove too brittle to continue clamping flesh as elastic as that of the two humans!

By now the termite-ruler seemed to have recovered fully from its gargantuan meal. And while, of course, there was no expression of any kind to be read in the stony, dull eyes, its actions seemed once more to indicate curiosity about these queer, two-legged bugs that wandered in here where they had no business to be.

The team of workers bore it close again, lowered the great head close to Denny. One of the team began chipping at the brown shell where it encased and held immovably to his body Denny's left hand.

A bit of the shell dropped away, exposing the fingers. Delicately, accurately, the worker's normal-sized but powerful mandibles edged the little finger away from the rest—and closed down over it... .

"Denny!" burst out Jim, who could just see, out of the corners of his eyes, what was being done. "My God ... Denny... ."

Dennis himself said nothing. His face went white as chalk, and great drops of perspiration stood out on his forehead. But no sound came from his tortured lips.

The finger was lifted to the terrible little mouth under the gigantic head. The mouth received it; the worker nuzzled with its mandibles for another finger. The monarch, having tried the taste of this latest addition to his larder, had found it good.

Jim writhed and twisted in his weakening bonds. There was a soft snapping as several now thoroughly dried sections of the brown substance cracked loose. The termite team whirled around; the ruler stared, as though in sudden realization of danger.

More furiously Jim fought his bonds. Dennis was still, recovering slowly from the nauseating weakness that had followed the pain of his mutilated hand. There was less blood flow than might have been

expected, due, perhaps, to the fact that the nipping mandibles had pinched some of the encasing shell tight over the wound.

With a dull crack, a square foot of the brown stuff burst from Jim's straining chest. But now the monarch moved to correct the situation.

The two giant soldiers at the doorway started across the great room toward them. Simultaneously, a second of the syringe-headed termites moved to renew the bonds that were being broken.

But the move had come a shade too late. Jim kicked his legs free with a last wild jerk, and staggered to his feet. His arms were still held, in a measure, in spite of his utmost efforts to free them of the clinging brown stuff. But he could, and did, run away from the body of soldiers surrounding the monarch just before the deadly syringe of the first attacking termite could function against him.

The great, flabby head hurtled his way. But he knew what to expect, now. As the slimy brown stream, directed by the agitated termite-ruler, squirted toward him, he leaped alertly aside—leaped again as the head swung around—and saw with savage hope that the monster had exhausted its discharge!

The two soldiers from the doorway closed in on him now. With their apparent command of the situation, the monstrosities with the bung- and syringe-heads closed in more tightly around their monarch. Theirs, evidently to protect that vulnerable big brain, and leave the attacking to others.

Jim fled down between the rows of paralyzed insects. The two great guards from the doorway, mandibles reaching fiercely toward the fugitive, followed. And there commenced, there in that deep-buried insect hell, a chase for life.

## The Coming of the Soldiers

For a moment Jim was handicapped in fleetness and agility by the fact that his arms were hampered. But the two hideous guards, though each was a dozen times more powerful than any man its size, were handicapped in a chase, too—by the very weight of their enormous mandibles. In their thundering chase after Jim, they resembled nothing so much as two powerful but clumsy battleships chasing a relatively puny but much more agile destroyer.

Behind the great bulk of a paralyzed June bug, Jim halted for a fraction while he tore his arms at last free of the clinging brown stuff. The guards rushed around the June bug at him.

He leaped for the row of hanging cisterns; and there, while he dodged from one to another of the loathsome vats, he thought over a plan that had come to his racing mind. It wasn't much of a plan, and it seemed utterly futile in the face of the odds against him. But he had boasted, before starting this mad adventure, that Man's wits were superior to any bug's. It was time now to see if his boast had been an empty one.

He fainted toward the far end of the laboratory. The guards, acting always as if they had a dozen eyes instead of none, rushed to prevent this, cutting across his path and closing the exit with clashing jaws.

Jim raced toward the spot where Denny lay. This was within twenty yards of the spot where, behind his ring of guards, the big-brained ruler now cowered. But, while one of the syringe-monsters sent a brown stream blindly toward the leaping, shifting man, no other attacking move was made. The soldiers remained chained to their posts. Jim retrieved his spear—and the first part of his almost hopeless plan had succeeded!

It was good, the feel of that smooth steel. He balanced the ponderous weapon lightly. An ineffective thing against the plates of living armor

covering the scissor-mandibles. But it was not against them—at least not directly—that he was planning to use it now!

Once more he darted toward the living cisterns. The soldiers followed close behind.

Under the bulging abdomen of the termite containing the reddish acid, Jim halted as though to make a defiant last stand against the guards. They stopped, too, then began to advance on him from either side, more slowly, like two great cats stalking a mouse.

Muscles bunched for a lightning-quick move, eyes narrowed to mere slits as he calculated distances and fractions of a second. Jim stood there beneath the great acid vat. The mandibles were almost within slicing distance now.

The guards opened wide their tremendous jaws, forming two halves of a deadly horn circle that moved swiftly to encompass him. They leaped... .

With barely a foot left him, Jim darted back, then poised his spear and shot it straight toward the bulging, live sack that held the acid above the guards.

The acid spurted from the spear hole. Jim clenched his fists and unconsciously held his breath till his chest ached, as the scarlet liquid spread over the great hulks that twisted and fought in ponderous frenzy to untangle legs and antennae and mandibles from the snarl their collision had made of them.

The acid bit through steel and human flesh. On the other hand, it had not harmed the horny flipper of the termite worker that had flicked it onto the garden slug. Did that mean that the flipper was immunized to the stuff, like the lining of the stomach, which is unharmed by acids powerful enough to decompose other organic matter? Or did it mean that *all* horn was untouched by it?

He groaned aloud. The two great insects had drawn apart by now, and had sprung from under the shattered acid vat. Again they were on the trail. The maneuver had been fruitless! The chase was on again, which meant—since he could not hope to elude the blind but ably directed creatures forever—that all hope was lost... .

Then he shouted with triumph. A massive foreleg dropped from one of the guards, to crash to the floor. Whether or not the acid was able to

set on the horny exterior of the termites, it was as deadly to their soft interiors as to any other sort of flesh! The acid had found the joint of that foreleg and had eaten through it as hot iron sinks through butter!

Still the injured creature came on, with Jim ever retreating, twisting and dodging from one side of the huge room to the other, leaping over the smaller paralyzed insects and darting behind the larger carcasses. But now the thing's movements were very slow—as were the movements of its companion.

Another leg fell hollowly to the floor, like an abandoned piece of armor; and then two at once from the second termite.

Both stopped, shuddering convulsively. The agony of those two enormous, dumb and blind things must have been inconceivable. The acid was by now spending its awful force in their vitals, having seeped down through every joint and crevice in their living armor. They were hardly more than huge shells of horn, kept alive only by their unbelievable vitality.

One more feeble lunge both made in concert, toward the puny adversary that had outwitted them. Then both, as though at a spoken command, stopped dead still. Next instant they crashed to the floor, shaking it in their fall.

For a second Jim could only stand there and gaze at their monstrous bodies. His plan had succeeded beyond all belief; and realization of this success left him dazed for an instant. But it was only for an instant.

Recovering himself, he raced to the acid vat to recover the spear he'd punctured it with—only three feet of it was left: the rest had been eaten away by the powerful stuff—and then wheeled to help Denny.

By now the crackling brown stuff had fallen from Denny, too—enough, at least for him to struggle to his feet and hasten its cracking by tearing at it with partially loosened hands. As Jim reached him, he freed himself entirely save for the last few bits that stuck to him as bits of shell cling to a newborn chick.

They turned together toward the corner where the termite-ruler was cowering behind the guards that surrounded it. Intellect to a degree phenomenal for an insect, this thing might have; but of the blind fierce courage possessed by its subjects, it assuredly had none! In proof of this was the fact that when the half dozen specialized soldiers ringing it round might have leaped to the aid of the two clumsy door guards and

probably have ended the uneven fight in a few minutes, the craven monarch had ordered them to stay at their guard-posts rather than take the risk of remaining unguarded and defenseless for a single moment! Increasing intelligence apparently had resulted (as only too often it does in the world of men) in decreasing bravery!

An attack on the thing, closely guarded as it was, seemed hopeless. Those enormous, flat-topped heads held ready to present their steely surfaces as shields! Those armored terrors with the syringe-heads—one of which still held a full cargo of the terrible brown fluid that at a touch could bind the limbs of the men once more in the straitjacket embrace! What could the two do against that barrier?

Nevertheless, without a word being spoken, and without a second's hesitation, Jim and Denny advanced on the bristling ring—and the heart of termite power it enclosed. Not only was the slimmest of hopes of escape rendered impossible while the super-termite lived to direct its subjects against them—but also they had a reckoning to collect from the thing if they could... .

Denny glanced down at his hand, from which slow red drops still oozed.

At their approach, the guarding ring shifted so that the soldier whose head was still bulging with the brown liquid, faced them. The two men stopped, warily. They must draw the sting from that monster before they dared try to come closer.

Jim feinted, leaping in and to one side. The guard turned with him, moved forward a bit as though to discharge a brown stream at him—but held its fire. Jim moved still closer, then leaped crabwise to one side as the brain behind the guards telepathed in a panic for its blind minion to release some of its ammunition. The flood missed Jim only by inches.

Denny took his turn at gambling with death. He shouted ringingly, and ran a dozen steps straight at the monster that was the principal menace. At the last moment he flung himself aside as Jim had done—but this time the stream was not to be drawn.

Still most of the deadly liquid was left; the thing's head bulged with it. And no real move could be made till that head was somehow emptied.

"Your spear!" panted Denny, who was armed only with the three-foot club which was all that was left of the spear that had entered the acid bag.



Jim nodded. As he had done under the acid vat, he drew it back for a throw—and shot it forward with all the power of his magnificent shoulders.

The glittering length of steel slashed into the flabby, living syringe. A fountain of molasseslike liquid gushed out.

The move had not been elaborately reasoned out; it had been a natural; almost instinctive one, simply a blow struck for the purpose of draining the dread reservoir of its sticky contents. But the results—as logical and inevitable as they were astounding and unforeseen—were such that the move could not have been wiser had all the gods of war conspired to help the two men with shrewd advice.

The searching spear-point had evidently found the brain behind the syringe of the thing; for it reared in an agony that could only have been that of approaching death, and ran amuck.

No longer did the ruling brain that crouched behind it have the power to guide its movements, it seemed. The telepathic communications had been snapped with that crashing spear-point. It charged blindly, undirected, in havoc-wreaking circles. And in an instant the whole aspect of the battle had been changed.

The ring of living armor presented by the other soldiers was broken as the enormous, dying termite charged among them. Furthermore, the fountain of thick brown liquid exuding from its head, smeared the limbs of the soldiers the blind, crazed thing touched, as well as its own.

In thirty seconds or less the wounded giant was down, still alive, but wriggling feebly in a binding sheath of its own poison. And with it, so smeared as to be utterly out of the struggle, were three of the others.

Quick to seize the advantage, Jim leaped to wrench his spear from the conquered giant's head. And side by side he and Denny started again the charge against the ruler's guards, which, while still mighty in defense, were by their very nature unable to attack.

Three of these guards were left. Two of them were the freaks with the great, armored, bung-heads—and the soft and vulnerable bodies. The third was of the syringe type, with invulnerable horn breastplate and body armor—but with a head that, now its fatal liquid was exhausted, was useless in battle.

"Take 'em one by one," grunted Jim, setting the example by swinging his spear at the body of the nearest guard. "We'll get at that damn thing with the overgrown brains yet!"

His spear clanged on iron-hard horn as the termite swung its unwieldy head to protect its unarmored body. The force of the contact tore the spear from his hand; but almost before it could drop, he had recovered it. And in that flashing instant Denny had darted in at the side of the thing and half disembowelled it with a thrust of the acid-blunted point of his three-foot bar, and a lightninglike wrench up and to the side.

"Only two left!" cried Jim, stabbing at the flabby head of the syringe-monster that loomed a foot above his own head. "We'll do it yet, Denny!"

But at that moment a clashing and rattling at the doorway suddenly burst in on the din of the eery fight. Both men stared at each other with surrender in their eyes.

"Now we *are* all through!" yelled Jim, almost calm in his complete resignation. "But we'll try to reach that devilish thing before we're doomed!"

In the heat of the swift, deadly fray, the two men had forgotten for the moment, that these few soldiers ranged against them were not all the fighters in the mound city. But the quaking intellect they were striving to reach had not forgotten! At some time early in the one-sided struggle it had sent out a soundless call to arms. And now, in the doorway, struggling to force through in numbers too great for the entrance's narrow limits, were the first of the soldier hordes the ruler had commanded to report here for fight duty. And behind them, as far as the eye could see, the tunnel was blocked by yet others marching to kill the creatures that menaced their leader. The abortive effort at escape, it seemed, was doomed.

The strength of desperation augmented Jim's naturally massive muscular power. He whirled his spear high over his head, clubwise. Disdaining now to try for a thrust behind and to one side of the great conical head that faced him, he brought the bar down with sledge-hammer force on the horn-plated thing.

As though it had been a willow wand, the big bar whistled through the air in its descent. With a crack that could be heard even above the crashing mandibles of the soldiers pouring across the hundred-yard

floor toward the scene of battle, the bar landed on the living buckler of a head.

The head could not have been actually harmed. But the brain behind it was patently jarred and numbed for an instant. The great creature stood still, its head weaving slowly back and forth. Jim swung his improvised club in another terrific arc... .

Denny darted around behind the ponderously wheeling bulk of the last remaining guard to the team of worker termites. He, too, swung his arms high—over the bloated brain-bag that cowered down between the backs that bore it—leaping here and there to avoid the blunt mandibles of the burden bearers. He, too, brought down his three-foot length of bar with all the force he could muster, the sight of that swollen, hideous head atop the withered remnants of termite body lending power to his muscles.

And now, just as the nearest of the soldiers reached out for them, the termite-ruler lay helpless on the backs of its living crutches, with its attenuated body quivering convulsively, and its balloonlike, fragile head cleft almost in two halves. It was possible that even that terrific injury might not be fatal to a thing so great and flexible of brain, and so divorced from the ills as well as the powers of the flesh. But for the moment at least it was helpless, an inert mass on the patient backs of the termite team.

"To the acid vat," snapped Jim. "We'll make our last stand there."

Dodging the nearest snapping mandibles, Denny ran beside his companion to where the termite, dead now, with its distended abdomen deflated and the last of the acid trickling from the hole caused by Jim's spear, still hung head down from the ceiling.

The powerful ruler of this vast underground city was crushed—for the moment at least. But the fate of the two humans seemed no less certain than it had before. For now the huge chamber was swarming with the giant soldiers. In numbers so great that they crashed and rattled against each other as they advanced, they marched toward the place where the broken monarch still quivered in weak convulsions—and behind which, near the acid vat, the two men crouched.

## Chapter 9

### The Cannibalistic Orgy

At first Jim and Dennis could only comprehend the *numbers* of the foe—could only grip their bars and resolve to die as expensively as possible. But then, as a few seconds elapsed during which they were amazingly not charged by the insects, they began to notice the *actions* of the things.

They were swarming so thickly about the spot where their leader had fallen that all the men could see was their struggling bodies. And the movements of these soldiers were puzzling in the extreme.

The things seemed, of a sudden, to be fighting among themselves! At any rate, they were not hurrying to attack the unique, two-legged bugs by the deflated acid bag.

Instead, they seemed to be having a monstrous attack of colic as they rolled about their vanquished monarch. With their antennae weaving wildly, and their deadly jaws crashing open and shut along the floor, they were fairly wallowing about that section. And the crowding ring of soldiers surrounding the wallowers were fighting like mad things to shove them out of place.

Over each other they struggled and rolled, those on the top and sides of the solid mass pressing to get in and down. In stark astonishment, the two men watched the inexplicable conflict—and wondered why they had not already been rushed and sliced to pieces by the steely, ten-foot mandibles.

In Dennis' mind, as he watched, wide-eyed, the crazy battle of the monsters around the spot, a memory struggled to be recognized. He had seen something vaguely like this before, on the upper earth, what was it?

Abruptly he remembered what it was. And with the recollection—and all the possibilities of deliverance it suggested—he shouted aloud and clutched Jim's arm with trembling fingers.

That scene of carnage suggested to his mind the day he had seen a cloud of vultures fighting over the carcass of a horse in the desert. The mad pushing, the slashing and rending of each other as all fought for the choice morsels of dead flesh! It was identical.

The termites, he knew, were deliberately cannibalistic. A race so efficiently run, so ingenious in letting nothing of possible value go to waste, would almost inevitably be trained to consume the bodies of dead fellow beings. And now—now ...

The gruesome monarch, that thing of monstrous brain and almost nonexistent body, was no longer the monarch. It was either dead, or utterly helpless. In that moment of death or helplessness—was it being fallen upon and eaten by the horde of savage things it normally ruled? Did the termite hordes make a practice of devouring their helpless and worn-out directing brains as it was known they devoured all their worn-out, no longer potent queens?

It certainly looked as if that was what the leaderless horde of soldiers was doing here! Or, at any rate, trying to do; accustomed to being fed by the workers, with mandibles too huge to permit of normal self-feeding, they would probably be able to hardly more than strain clumsily after the choice mass beneath them and absorb it in morsels so small as to be more a source of baffled madness than of satisfaction.

Which latter conjecture seemed certainly to support the theory that the soldier termites were not trying to help their fallen monarch, but were trampling and slashing it to death in an effort to devour it!

"Quick!" snapped Denny, realizing that it was a chance that must not be overlooked; that even if he were wrong, they might as well die trying to get to the doorway as be crushed to death where they stood. "Run to the exit!"

"Through that nightmare army?" said Jim, astounded. "Why, we haven't a chance of making it!"

"Come, I say!" Denny dragged him a few feet by main force. "I hope—I believe—we won't be bothered. If a pair of jaws crushes us, it will probably be by accident and not design—the brutes are too busy to bother about us now."

Still gazing at Denny as though he thought him insane, Jim tarried no longer. He began to edge his way, by Denny's side, toward the distant door.

In a very few feet Denny's theory was proved right. None of the gigantic insects tried to attack them. But even so that journey to the exit, a distance of more than the length of a football field, was a ghastly business.

On all sides the giant, armored bodies rushed and shoved. The clash of horn breastplates against armored legs, of mandibles and granitic heads against others of their kind, was ear-splitting. The monsters, in their effort to indulge the cannibalistic instinct—at once so horrible to the two humans, and so fortunate for them—were completely heedless of their own welfare and everything else.

Like giant ice cakes careening in the break-up of a flood, they crunched against each other; and like loose ice cakes in a flood, every now and then one was forced clear up off its feet by the surrounding rush, to fall back to the floor a moment later with a resounding crash.

It would seem an impossibility for any two living things as relatively weak and soft as men to find a way through such a maelstrom. Yet—Jim and Denny did.

Several times one or the other was knocked down by a charging, blind monster. Once Denny was almost caught and crushed between two of the rock-hard things. Once Jim only saved himself from a pair of terrific, snapping jaws that rushed his way, by using his short spear as a pole and vaulting up and over them onto the monster's back, where he was allowed to slide off unheeded as the maddened thing continued in its rush. But they reached the door!

There they gazed fearfully down the corridor, sure there would be hundreds more of the soldiers crowding to answer the last call of their ruling, master mind. But only a few stragglers were to be seen, and these, called to the grim feast by some sort of instinct or perhaps some sense of smell, rushed past with as little attempt to attack them as the rest.

The two men ran down the tunnel, turned a corner into an ascending tunnel they remembered from their trip in, raced up this, hearts pounding wildly with the growing hope of actually escaping from the mound with their lives—and then halted. Jim cursed bitterly, impotently.

Branching off from this second tunnel, all looking exactly alike and all identical in the degree of their upward slant, were five more tunnels! Like spokes of a wheel, they radiated out and up; and no man could

have told which to take. They stopped, in despair, as this phase of their situation, unthought of till now, was brought home to them.

"God! The place is a labyrinth! How can we ever find, our way out?" groaned Jim.

"All we can do is keep going on—and up," said Denny, with a shake of his head.

At random, they picked the center of the five underground passages, and walked swiftly along it. And now they began to come in contact again with the normal life of the vast mound city.

Here soldiers were patrolling up and down with seeming aimlessness, while near-by workers labored at shoring up collapsing sections of tunnel wall, or at carrying staggering large loads of food from one unknown place to another. But now there seemed to be a certain lack of system, of coordination, in the movements of the termites.

"Damned funny these soldiers aren't joining in the rush with the rest to get to the laboratory in answer to the command of the ruler," said Jim, warily watching lest one of the gigantic guards end the queer truce and rush them. "And look at the way the workers move—just running aimlessly back and forth with their loads. I don't get it."

"I think I do," said Denny. He pitched his voice low, and signed for Jim to walk more slowly, on tiptoe. "These soldiers aren't with the rest because only a certain number was called. It's simple mathematics: if all the soldiers in the mound tried to get in that room back there where the ruler was, they'd get jammed immovably in the tunnels near-by. The king-termite, with all the astounding reasoning power it must have had, called only as many as could crowd in, in order to avoid a jam in which half the soldiers in the city might be killed.

"As for the aimless way the workers are moving—you forget they haven't a leader any more. They are working by habit and instinct only, carrying burdens, building new wall sections, according to blind custom alone, and regardless of whether the carrying and building are necessary."

"In that case," sighed Jim, "we'd have a good chance to getting out of here—if we could only find the path!"

"I'm sure we can find the path, and I'm sure we can get out," said Denny confidently. "For in a mound of this size there must be many paths leading to the upper world, and there is no reason—with the

omnipotent ruling brain dead and eaten—why any of these creatures should try to stop or fight us."

Which was good logic—but which left entirely out of consideration that one factor which man so often forgets but is still inevitably governed by: the unpredictable whims of fate. For on their way out they were to blunder into the one place in all the mound which was—death or no death of the ruling power—absolutely deadly to them; and were to arouse the terrible race about them to frenzies that were based, not on any reasoned thought processes, or which in any case they were of themselves incapable, but on the more grim and fanatic foundations of unreasoned, primal, outraged instinct.



# Chapter 10

## The Termite Queen

The slope of the upward-leading tunnels had become less noticeable, from which fact the two men reasoned hopefully that they were near ground level. And now they began to see termite workers bearing a new sort of burden: termite eggs, sickly looking lumps that had only too obviously been newly laid.

A file of workers approached. In a long line, each with an egg, looking for all the world like a file of human porters bearing the equipment of a jungle expedition. Slowly, the things moved—carefully—bound for some such vast incubator as the one Jim and Dennis had stumbled into some hours before.

"We want to go in the opposite direction from them," Denny whispered. "They're coming from the Queen termite's den—and we don't want to blunder in there!"

They about-faced, and moved with the workers till they came to the nearest passage branching away from the avenue on which the file marched. Denny dabbed at his forehead.

"Lucky those things came in time to warn us," he said. "From what little science knows of the termites, I can guess that the Queen's chamber would be a chamber of horrors for us!"

They walked on, searching for another main avenue, such as the one they had left; which might be an artery leading to the outside world. But they had not gone far when they were again forced to change their course.

Ahead of them, marching in regular formation, came a band of soldiers larger than the usual squad. They filled the tunnel so compactly that the two men did not dare try to squeeze past them.

"Here," whispered Jim, pointing to a side tunnel.

They stole down it; but in a moment it developed that their choice had been an unlucky one: the crash of the heavy, armored bodies continued to follow them. The soldiers had turned down that tunnel, too.

"Are they after us again?" whispered Jim.

Denny shrugged. There was still a remnant of the disguising termite-paste on their bodies to fool the insects. It seemed impossible that the ruling brain behind them had survived the cannibalistic rush and taken command of the mound again? But—was anything impossible in this world of terror?

Steadily the two were forced to retreat before the measured advance of the guards. And now the tunnel they were in broadened—and abruptly ended in another of the vast chambers that seemed to dot the mound city at fairly regular intervals. But this one appeared to be humming with activity, if the noise coming from within it was any indication.

The two passed at the threshold, dismayed at the evidence of super-activity in the chamber ahead of them. But while they paused there, the soldiers behind them rounded a corner. They could not go back. There were no more of the opportune side entrances to dodge into. All they could do was retreat still farther—into the vast room before them.

They did so, reluctantly, moving step by step as the marching band behind them crashed rhythmically along. But once inside the great chamber, they shrank back against the wall with whispered imprecations at the final, desperate trick fate had played on them.

Their path of retreat, leading around labyrinthine corners and by-passages, had doubled back on them without their having been aware of it. They were in the very place Dennis had wished so much to avoid—the chamber of the Queen termite!

High overhead, almost lost in the dimness, was the arching roof. Around the circular walls were innumerable tunnel entrances. At each of these stood a termite guard—picked soldiers half again as large as the ordinary soldiers, with mandibles so great and heavy that it was a marvel the insects could support them.

Hurrying here and there were worker termites. And these were centering their activities on an object as fearful as anything that ever haunted the mind of a madman.

Up and back, this object loomed, half filling the enormous room like a zeppelin in a hangar. And like a zeppelin—a blunt, bloated

zeppelin—the object was circular and tapered at both ends. But the zepelin was a living thing—a horrible travesty of life.

At the end facing the two men was a tiny dot of a head, almost lost in the whitish mass of the enormous body. Around this a cluster of worker termites pressed, giving nourishment to the insatiable mouth. At the far end of the vast shape another cluster of termites thronged. And these bore away a constant stream of termite eggs—that dripped from the zepelinlike, crammed belly at the rate of almost one a second.

Her Highness, the Queen—two hundred tons of flabby, greasy flesh, immobile, able only to eat and lay eggs.

"My God," whispered Jim. Utterly unstrung, he gazed at that mighty, loathsome mass, listening to its snapping jaws as it took on the tons of nourishment needed for its machinelike functioning. "My God!"

Instinctively he whirled to run back through the entrance they had come through. But now, with the admittance of the soldier band that had pressed them in here, the entrance was guarded again by one of the giants permanently stationed there.

"What had we better do?" he breathed to Denny.

Dennis stared helplessly around. He had noticed that the termites in here were acting differently from the others they had encountered since leaving the lair of the termite-ruler. These were moving uneasily, restlessly, stopping now and again with waving, inquisitive antennae. It looked ominously as though they had sensed the presence of intruders here in the sanctum where their race was born, and were dimly wondering what to do.

"We might try each tunnel mouth, one by one, on the chance that we can find a careless guard somewhere," Dennis muttered at last. "But for heaven's sake don't touch any of the brutes! I think that at the slightest signal the whole mob of the things would spring on us and tear us to pieces. Most of the paste is rubbed off by now."

Jim nodded. He had no desire to brush against one of the colossal, special guard of soldiers if he could help it, or against any of the relatively weak workers that might give the signal of alarm.

Stealing silently along among the blind, instinctively agitated monsters, they worked a circuitous way from one exit to another. But nowhere did any chance of getting out of the place present itself. Across

each tunnel mouth was placed one of the enormous guards, twelve-foot mandibles opened like a waiting steel trap.

Halfway around the tremendous room they went, without mishap, but also without finding an exit they could slip through. And then, in the rear of the vast bulk of the Queen, it happened.

One of the worker termites, bearing an egg in its mandibles, faltered, and dropped its precious burden. The thing fell squashily to the floor within a foot of Jim, who had brushed against the wall to let the burden bearer pass without touching him. Jim, attempting to sidestep away from the spot, as the worker put out blind feelers, to search for the dropped egg, lost his balance for a fraction of a second—and stepped squarely on the nauseous ovoid!

Frantically he stepped out of the mess he had created, and the two stood staring at each other, holding their breaths, fearful of what might result from that accidental destruction of budding termite life.

The worker, feeling about for its burden, came in contact with the shattered egg. It drew back abruptly, as though in perplexity: soft and tough, the egg should not have broken merely from being dropped. Then it felt again. . . .

For a few seconds nothing whatever occurred. The two breathed again, and began to hope that their fears had been meaningless. But that was not to be.

The worker termite finally began to rush back and forth, antennae whipping from side to side, patently trying to discover the cause of the tragedy. And Jim and Dennis rushed back and forth, too, engaged in a deadly game of blind man's buff as they tried to avoid the questing antennae—which, registering sensation by touch instead of smell, was not to be fooled by the last disappearing traces of the termite-paste.

The game did not last long. One of the feelers whipped against Dennis' legs—and hell broke loose!

The worker emitted a sound like the shriek of a circular saw gone wild. And on the instant all its fellows, and the gigantic guards at the exits, stiffened to rigid attention.

Again came the roaring sound, desolate, terrible, at once a call to arms and a funeral dirge. And now every termite in the dim, cavernous chamber began the battle dance Jim and Dennis had seen performed by the

termite guard when it was confronted by the horde of ants. Not moving their feet, they commenced to sway back and forth, while long, rhythmic shudders convulsed their grotesque bodies. It was a formal declaration of war against whatever mad things had dared invade the fountain-spring of their race.

Jim and Dennis leaped toward the nearest exit, determined to take any risk on the chance of escaping from the horde of things now aware of their presence and ravening for their blood. But in this exit—the only one accessible to them now—the guard had commenced the jaw-clashing that closed openings more efficiently than steel plates could have done. An attempt to pass those enormous mandibles presented no risk; what it presented was suicide.

By now the dread war dance had stopped. All the termites in the chamber were converging slowly toward the spot where the termite had given the rasping alarm. Even the workers, ordinarily quick to run from danger, were advancing instead of retreating. Of all living things in the room only the Queen, unable to move her mountainous bulk, did not join in the slow, sure move to slash to pieces the hated trespassers.

Again the questing antennae of the worker that had given the alarm touched one of the men. With a deafening rasp it sprang toward them, blind but terrible.

Dennis swung his steel club. It clashed against the scarcely less hard mandibles of the worker, not harming them, but seeming to daze the insect a little.

Jim followed the act by plunging his longer spear into the soft body. No words were wasted by the two men. It was a fight for life again, with the odds even more heavily against them than they had been in the ruler's lair.

Behind them, blocking the only exit they had any chance whatever of reaching, the guard continued its clashing mandible duty. If only it, too, would join in the blind search for the trespassers, thus giving them an opportunity of slipping out! But the monster gave no indication of doing such a thing.

Another worker termite flung its bulk at them. Its mandibles, tiny in comparison with those of the great guards but still capable of slicing either of the men in two, snapped perilously close to Jim's body. There

was a second's concerted action: Dennis' club lashed against the thing's head, Jim's spear tore into the vulnerable body.

Ringed them round, the main band of the termites moved closer. They moved slowly, in no hurry, apparently only too sure the enemy could not possibly get away from them. And the two worker termites killed were mere incidents compared to the avalanche of mandible and horn that would be on them in about thirty seconds.

However, the two dead termites gave Jim a sudden inspiration. He glanced from the carcasses to the mechanically moving, deadly jaws of the guard that barred the nearest exit.

"Denny," he panted, "feed it this."

He pointed first toward the nearest carcass and then toward the rock-crushing, steadily snapping jaws.

"I'll try to hold the bridge here—"

But Dennis was on his way, catching Jim's idea with the first gesture.

He stooped down, and caught the dead termite by two of its legs. Close to two hundred pounds the mass weighed; but strength is an inconstant thing, and increases or decreases according to the vital needs of life-preservation.

Clear of the floor, Denny lifted the bulk, and with its repulsive weight clasped in his arms, he advanced toward the mighty guard.

Behind him, Jim glared desperately at the third termite that was about to attack. No feeble worker this, but one of the most colossal of all the Queen's guard.

Towering over Jim, mandibles wide open and ready to smash over its prey, the giant reared toward him. And behind him came the main body of the horde. It was painfully evident that the clash with the lone soldier would be the last single encounter. After that the hundreds of the herd would be on the men, tearing and trampling them to bits.

During the thing's steady, inexorable approach, which had taken far less time than that required to tell of it, Jim had clenched his fingers around his spear and calculated as to the best way to hold the monster off for just the few seconds needed by Denny to try the plan suggested.

The monster ended its slow advance in a lunge, that, for all its great bulk, was lightning quick. But a shade more quickly, Jim sidestepped the

terrible mandibles, leaped back along the armored body till he had reached the unarmored rear, and thrust his spear home with all his force.

The hideous guard reared with pain and rage. But this was no worker termite, to be killed with a thrust. As though nothing had happened, the huge hulk wheeled around. The mandibles crashed shut with deafening force over the space Jim had occupied but an instant before.

And now the inner circle of the multiple ring of death was within a few yards. Jim leaped to put himself behind the living barrier of the attacking soldier. But it was only a matter of a few seconds now, before he and Denny would be caught in the blind bull charges of the wounded soldier or by the surrounding ring of maddened termites.

"Denny?" he shouted imploringly over his shoulder, not daring to take his eyes off the danger in front of him.

"Soon!" he heard Dennis pant.

The entomologist had got almost up to the twelve-foot jaws that closed the exit. He paused a moment, gathering strength. Then he heaved the soft mass of the dead termite into the clashing mandibles.

"Jim!" he cried, as the burden left his arms.

Jim turned, raced the few yards intervening between the ring of death and the doorway. Together they waited to see if their forlorn hope would work... .

It could not have lasted more than a second, that wait, yet it seemed at least ten minutes. And then both cried aloud—and crouched to repeat the maneuver that had saved them from death when they had first entered this insect hell.

For the enormous, smashing jaws had caught the body of the worker termite with ferocious eagerness, and were worrying the inanimate carcass with terrible force.

The great jaws were occupied just an instant before the monster sensed that it was one of his own kind that he was mangling so thoroughly. But in that instant Jim had slid on his chest along the floor past the armored head and shoulders, and Dennis had leaped to follow.

But Dennis was not to get off so lightly.

The charging ring of termites had closed completely in by now. The snapping mandibles of the nearest one were up to him. They opened; shut.

They caught Denny on the back swing, knocking him six feet away instead of slicing him wide open. Denny got to his feet almost before he had landed; but between him and the exit was the bulk of the termite that had felled him, and in the doorway the guard had dropped the body it was slashing to bits, and had recommenced its slashing jaw movements.

"Jim! For God's sake... ." shrieked the doomed man.

Beside himself, he managed to hurdle clear over the massive insect between him and the doorway. But there he stopped, with the guard's great mandibles fanning the air less than a foot from him. "Jim!" came the agonized cry again.

And behind the gigantic termite, in the tunnel, with at least a possibility of safety lying open before him, Jim heard and answered the call.

Savagely he plunged his spear into the unarmored rear of the guard, tore it out, thrust again... .

The thing heaved and struggled to turn, shaking the tunnel with its rasping anger—and taking its attention at last away from the duty of closing that tunnel mouth.

With no room to run and slide, Denny fell to the floor and commenced to creep through the narrow space between the trampling guard's bulk and the wall. He felt his left arm and shoulder go numb as he was crushed for a fleeting instant against the wood partition. Broken, he thought dimly. The collar-bone. But still he kept moving on.

He moved in a haze of pain and weakness. He did not see that he had passed clear of the menacing hulk—that his slow crawling had been multiplied in results by the fact that the termite guard had finally, stopped trying to turn in the narrow passage and had rushed ahead into the Queen's chamber, to turn there and come dashing back. He did not see that Jim was finally disarmed and completely helpless, with his spear buried beyond recovery in the bulk of the maddened guard. He hardly felt Jim's supporting arm as it was thrust under him, to half drag and half lead him along the tunnel away from the horde behind.

He only knew that they were moving forward, with the din behind them—as the grim cohorts of the Queen fought to all crowd ahead in the



narrow passage at once—keeping pace with them in spite of all they could do to make haste. And he only knew that finally Jim gave a great shout, and that suddenly they were standing under a rent in a tunnel roof through which sunlight was pouring.

Several worker termites were laboring to close up the chink and cut off the sunlight; but these, not being of the band outraged by the destruction of the egg in the Queen's chamber, moved swiftly away as the two men advanced.

Jim reached up and tore with frantic hands at the crumbling edges of the rotten wood overhead. Ignoring his gashed and bleeding fingers, he widened the breach till he, could pull himself up through it. Then he reached down, caught Denny's sound arm, and raised him by main strength.

They were in the clear air of the outer world once more, on a terrace in the mound low down near its base.

Jim and Dennis half slid, half fell down the near terrace slope to the jungle of grass stalks beneath. And there Denny bit his lip sharply, struggled against the weakness overcoming him—and fainted.

Jim caught him up over his shoulder, and staggered forward through the jungle. Behind, the termites poured out through the broken wall in an enraged flood, braving even the sunlight and outer air in their chase of the invaders that had, profaned the Queen's chamber.

"Matt!" shouted Jim with all the strength of his lungs, forgetting that his voice could not be heard by normal human ears. "Matt!"

But if Matthew Breen could not hear, he could see. The slightest inattention at his guard duty at that second would have resulted in two deaths. But he was on the alert.

Jim saw the sun blotted out swiftly, saw a huge, pinkish-gray wall swoop down between him and Denny, and the deadly horde of termites pursuing them. Then he saw another pinkish-gray wall, in which was set something—a shallow, regular, hollowed plateau—that looked familiar. The patty-dish in which he and Denny had been carried to this place of death and horror.

Jim knew he could not clamber into that great plateau; he was too exhausted. But the necessity was spared him.

The patty-dish scooped down under him, uprooting huge trees, digging up square yards of earth all around him. He was flung from his feet

to roll helplessly beside the unconscious Dennis, as men and earth and all were shifted from the dish's rim to its center.

Like gigantic express elevator the dish soared dizzily up in the tremendous hand that held it, over the vast pile of the mound city, over all the surrounding landscape, and was borne back toward Matt's automobile—and toward the laboratory where the bulk of their bodies waited, in protoplasmic form, in the dome of the glass bell.

# Chapter 11

## Back to Normal

"I think," said Jim, loading his pipe, "that now I really will settle down. No other adventures could seem like much after the one"—he repressed a shiver—"we've just passed through."

"And I think," said Dennis, following his own line of thought, "that as far the world of science goes, my exploring has been for nothing. Try to tell sober scientists of the specially evolved, huge-brained thing that rules the termite tribe and forms and holds the marvelous organization it has? Try to tell them—now that Matt has to stubbornly decided to keep secret his work with element eighty-five—that we were reduced to a quarter of an inch in height, and that we went through a mound and saw at first hand the things we describe? They'd shut me in an asylum!"

The two were sitting in Denny's apartment, once more conventionally clothed, and again their normal five feet eleven, and six feet two.

The reassembling of Denny's body had done odd things. Jim had set the broken bone with rough skill before stepping under the glass bell; and the fracture had been healed automatically by the growing deposit of protoplasmic substance resulting when Matt threw his switch.

But Denny's missing finger had baffled the reversing process. With no tiny pattern to form around, the former substance of his finger had simply gathered in a shapeless knob of flesh and bone like a tumorous growth sprouting from his hand. It would have to be amputated.

But the marvels performed under Matthew Breen's glass bell were far secondary to the two men. The things they had recently seen and undergone, and the possibility of telling folks about them, occupied their attention exclusively.

"Then you're not going to write a monograph on the real nature of termites, as you'd planned?" Jim asked Denny.

Denny shrugged dispiritedly. "People would take it for a joke instead of a scientific treatise if I did," he said.

Jim puffed reflectively at his pipe. A thought had come, to him that seemed to hold certain elements of possibility.

"Why not do this," he suggested: "Write it up first as a straight story, and see if people will believe it. Then, if they do, you can rewrite it as scientific fact."

And eventually they decided to do just that. And—here is their story.

**Transcriber's Note:**

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