

Enchantress of Lemuria

by Stanton A. Coblentz

WILL CLAYBROOK invented a means of seeing deep into the earth—and saw an incredible city far underground; and an incredibly lovely girl too

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[Notes and Cover Illustration](#)

“I’m at the club, Will. Why not I come down and we’ll have one of our old-time tete-a-tetes over the dinner table?” I listened expectantly for Will Claybrook’s voice in the receiver.

As it came to me now across the wire, it struck me as strained, remote, and singularly lacking in interest, almost like a voice from some other world.

“No—no—can’t. All tied up—can’t get away—not one minute.”

“Well then, maybe tomorrow?”

“No, not tomorrow. Not any evening. I’m too busy, Tom. Better come up here if you want to see me... Good-bye!”

Had it been any one but Will, I would have muttered, “To hell with him!”, and promptly turned to something else. But I was used to Will and his ways; he and I had been chums since we were freshmen at college; and knowing that he was doubtless deep in some new experiment, I determined to step into his laboratory that evening. I had been away on a long business trip and I was anxious to see him; he was my best friend.

He had already been working at inventions for more than ten years. Ever since his graduation from college, when he had been employed as an engineer by the Rowney Bridge and Construction Works, he had been spending his spare hours in his small but well equipped home laboratory. “Rod-and-Shuttle Claybrook” was the nickname some of the boys gave him; although to his intimates, of course, he was always simply “Will.”

I can still see him as he was in those days, a gangling six-footer, with a rail-thin body, a slight stoop, clothes perpetually shabby, and a long, lean, bespectacled face with a gigantic domed forehead and clear blue eyes with as innocent and yet intense and alive a light as I have ever seen in any human countenance.

But I doubt if there were many who could understand that rarely intelligent and eager soul, whose one passion, whose one devotion was science, to such an extent that he lived like a hermit and hardly seemed aware of the existence of the so-called “gentler sex”.

It was my own confident belief that Will would end in a position high among the world’s great inventive geniuses. It might take him years; but from what I had seen of his Multi-Tone Pocket Radio Receiver, his Manganese-Nickel Airplane Protective Antennae and his Super-Magnetic Sound Detector, I expected him to take a place side by side with Marconi and Edison.

Most of all, I had been impressed by the chemical which he named Blue Nitrolene. I know little of the formula of this accursed substance, except that it was a compound of nitrogen, carbon, sulphur and phosphorus; but I have seen how it acted as an *atomic catalyzer*. That is to say, the heavier and more

complex atoms broke down in its presence, to the accompaniment of an enormous release of energy; gold could literally be converted into iron, silver into lead, etc.

NEVER will I forget the time when, under careful control, Will injected a milligram of the sea-blue compound into a glass container filled with fifty pounds of steel. Instantly there was such a seething and bubbling that the metal disappeared in a mist, the glass melted, a furnace heat encompassed us, and, had it not been for the immediate application of a powerful stream of water, the laboratory and its occupants might have been written of in the past tense.

“Good heavens, Will,” I exclaimed, when I had begun to recover from the shock, “what’s the object? Suicide and murder?”

“Guess I measured the damned stuff wrong. Might have put in a tenth of a milligram too much,” he apologized, as he dolefully brushed back his thinning sandy hair.

“What you intend to do with it? Commit wholesale massacre?” I gibed.

“Well, in a sense,” he returned, gravely. “Can’t imagine anything better for wiping out an enemy in case of foreign invasion. But the Government, curse it, can’t see things that way. Gave a demonstration to an agent night before last, and he swore he wouldn’t handle it with a seven-mile pole. Seven-mile pole! That’s the very phrase he used!”

“Can’t blame him! That’s how I feel, too!” I grunted.

Nevertheless Will went on, in his solemn, heavy voice, to declaim against the imbecility of government agents.

ALL this was in my mind as I made my way expectantly toward Will’s house at the outskirts of town. But, though I was anticipating some new invention, how little did I foresee what awaited me!

Will’s eyes, as he mumbled a greeting, had an animation even beyond their usual enthusiastic glow. His whole face seemed illuminated; he moved with the oddly excited and yet preoccupied manner of a man who follows some inner light.

He scarcely took time to ask, perfunctorily,

“Well, how’s things, Tom?” But, leading me in among the flasks and wires of the laboratory, he broke out, irrepressibly,

“Come, this way, this way, you’re just in time. Got something to show you. Just step over this way, and you’ll see *her*.”

“Her?” I echoed, wondering if my friend could be suffering from a brain storm.

A look of pleasure, almost of delight radiated from that thin, intellectual face.

“Yes, her,” he repeated; and I noticed that his features had indefinably softened. “The sweetest, most charming, most beautiful—but come, you’ll see for yourself!”

His tones, his manner, it came to me with a shock, were no longer those of the woman-shunning hermit. They were those of a man in love!

But had my friend gone crazy? For surely no maiden, however ethereal, could be hiding among the wheels, rods and tubes of the laboratory! There was scarcely space for a cat to conceal itself!

“Quick, or she’ll go away!” he directed, impatiently; and pointed to the eye-piece of an instrument that reminded me of a hand telescope, except that it was turned earthward, and was connected with a long series of prisms and lenses and with an intricacy of wires that made a low continuous whirring.

He turned a dial, and a blue light widened at the base of the machine. There was a crackling as of remote muffled thunder; a green spark shot up and died. But I still wondered what vagary had possession of Will as I took my place at the eyepiece and peeped through with a squint.

“Now, now, quick, tell me! What do you see?” he popped out, impatiently.

“Not a darned thing!” I returned. For all that I could make out was a confusion of dancing lights and shadows.

“Wait, I’ve got to adjust it to your eyes!” he went on, giving the dial another twist.

Again the lights and shadows danced; then gradually they began to take definite shape, and I had the sensation of one who peers through opera glasses at a remote stage.

“Well now, now do you see?” Will demanded. “Do you see *her*?”

I did not see any *her*. But what I did observe was enough to make me wonder if we were not both out of our heads. Surely, it was all an illusion, an hallucination! Those incredible sights were not real, could not be real!

It seemed to me that I was looking down into an enormous cavern in the earth; a cavern as wide as whole counties and as deep as a mountain gorge. Just below me (or so it appeared, as I stared through the glass) a city spread, of such a construction that at first I did not know if it were a city at all. In fact, I might have mistaken it for some outlandish vegetable growth, had it not been for the weird silvery light that suffused it, in places tinged with amber, lavender or pale green.

The palaces (for so I thought of them) were all gracefully curved, some of them shaped like gigantic bubbles, some of them like immense mushrooms that glowed iridescently with an inner illumination. Here was a group of little blue-tinted dwellings that looked oddly like a cluster of hydrangeas; yonder was a domed temple that may have been of glass, and that changed gradually in color through pink and rose to violet and indigo. On curving walks that branched among the fairy-like buildings, little shapes that I took to be men and women were moving in a leisurely fashion; but they appeared too remote to be observed in detail.

“Well, now do you see *her*?” Will’s excited voice dinned in my ears.

I was too fascinated by what I did see to pay any heed to those words.

“Oh, Lord, just look what I’ve done!” exclaimed my friend, slapping his thigh in intense irritation. “Switched the dial back to ‘Distance.’ Of course, you don’t see her. What an idiot I am! Well here, now you’ll get a close-up!”

A sharp whirring rang out in my ears; the bubble towers vanished in a surge of reeling shadows; then, after a second or two, a new scene formed itself before my eyes.

“At last! At last do you see?” Will fairly shouted.

I was looking down at an alabaster court between two of the great mushroom-shaped buildings. At one side, the rainbowed spray of a fountain was visible. I could see that the walls of one of the palaces was covered with strangely beautiful painted inscriptions; while, upon glowing pedestals, I noticed the busts of venerable-looking bearded men, and women with faces like the Venus de Milo.

“Now, you numbskull! Tell me, do you see her?” insisted Will, with growing impatience.

“All I see is the busts,” I reported, wondering if my poor friend could be so far lost as to have fallen in love with a stone image.

“Then she’s gone away!” he groaned. “She’s gone away! Didn’t I tell you to hurry?”

“EVEN as he spoke, however, my attention was caught by a figure that glided slowly into sight. And instantly I understood what it was that had enchanted Will. I, too, though I had believed my romantic days well behind me, felt my pulses fluttering just a little at sight of that queenly being.

But “queenly,” I am afraid, is too pale a word to describe this sorceress who, with movements like music, passed briefly across my view. Not that there was anything about her of conscious witchery; she was young, not more than seventeen or eighteen; and her face, with the big lustrous violet eyes shining from beneath a moderate forehead crowned with auburn hair, beamed with the smiling innocence of one who is wholly untainted and unspoiled.

I fear, however, that it is beyond my powers to convey the impression of beauty she gave, more like a Grecian goddess than a mere mortal as she ambled on her way, clad in a robe of some shimmering cobweb substance that reached barely to her knees and left the shapely calves exposed above her sandaled feet. Her complexion was pale—almost of the traditional milky white; and her expression, as she burst momentarily into laughter (almost as if to ridicule me as I watched her!), was indescribably clear and bright.

I am ashamed to report it, but I was left babbling and incoherent as she drifted from view, followed by a peacock with magnificent outspread fan.

“Ah! So you’ve seen her!” exclaimed Will, not needing the confirmation of my words. “Isn’t she just about like heaven itself?”

I nodded; while Will greedily took my place at the eyepiece. But after a glance, he sighed,

“She’s gone, curse the luck! She’s gone! Don’t know when I’ll get a glimpse of her again!”

But for a long while he continued to stare steadily through the instrument.

MEANWHILE I was gradually regaining my sanity, and a thousand and one questions were popping into my mind. What was the great cavern I had just seen? Where was it? What were the mushroom palaces? Who was the maiden on the rainbow-fountained court? How had Will been able to see them through his instrument? Were they things that existed on some other planet? Were they mere reproductions, through a time machine, of segments of a remote past? These thoughts, and others as fantastic, flashed through my mind in rapid succession; but it was long before I could wean my friend away from the eyepiece and pry any semblance of an answer from his lips.

“Why, it’s all very simple,” he explained, as he absently fingered a dial marked *Remote Control*. “It’s all done through the Pellucid Depth Ray.”

“What under heaven’s that?”

“Guess you wouldn’t understand if I told you, Tom. It’s a sort of subterranean television machine.”

“Subterranean television machine?”

“Yes. In other words, a machine to see through the earth. I thought you would have guessed. What

do you think you were looking at, anyway, except a scene ten or fifteen miles below your feet?"

"Ten or fifteen miles below my feet? My God, Will!"

"Oh, the Pellucid Depth Ray can see much further than that," he declared, with an expression that seemed to say, "This is mere child's play."

"But how? How is it possible? No ray known—not even the cosmic rays—have anything like that penetrating power."

"Well, the word ray is perhaps a misnomer. Let's go back to the principle of television. Certain scenes are converted by electrical means into mere vibrations in the ether, from which they are converted back again into scenes upon a screen. In the same way, the events occurring beneath the earth's surface give rise to faint—very faint—electrical pulsations, which I am able to pick up by means of my machine so as to reproduce the original scenes. Of course, I have to amplify the impressions more than a million times. But is there anything more surprising about that than about other accomplishments in television and radio?"

"No, no, I suppose not," I admitted, reluctantly. "But how did you find this cavern in the earth? And what in thunder do you think it is, anyhow?"

"You know as well as I what it is," he returned, with a shrug. "Guess it'll take a whale of a lot of investigating to clear up that mystery. But how did I find it? Simplest thing on earth! Merely turned the Pellucid Depth Ray straight underground, looking for whatever I could find, until I came across this wonderful cavern. However, it was days before I saw any sign of *her*."

"Forget about her!" I counselled, not liking the dreamy look that had come into his eyes. "It won't do you any good, Will, brooding over a girl you'll never see except at long distance—"

"Oh, won't I!"

HE shot toward me with electrical suddenness; and flung me a glance that was challenging, almost defiant.

"What's to prevent me from going right down into the cavern—yes, and meeting her face to face? What's to prevent me, I'd like to know?"

"Holy Jerusalem, Will! You don't mean to say—"

"I mean to say I've got it all planned! What do you think I've been so damned busy about, anyway? It's taken me days of slow labor, but the Depth Ray has located a small tunnel that leads up from the main gallery, connecting with one of the natural caverns in the Whitley Range a few miles west of here."

"And you think—think you can find that cavern?"

"What's to prevent me, with the Depth Ray for guide?"

"But you wouldn't be damned fool enough—"

Sharply, almost angrily, his interruption flashed out.

"See here, Tom, better keep your comments to yourself! When I've made up my mind on any matter, then it's made up—and I was never more set on anything in my life than on this expedition down to the Great Cavern, as I call it. Just look! I've got everything arranged!"

He flung open a small closet door, revealing a neatly packed knapsack.

“Everything I need is there!” he rumbled on. “Concentrated food; water; flashlights; a camera; photographs of our country, and so on. Day after tomorrow I set out!”

I stared at him, stunned.

“Day after tomorrow? Mean to say you’re going to do this alone—and on foot? Why, man, you’ll never come out alive!”

“It’s worth any risk,” he declared, with a smile. “Yes, well worth any risk! Just think what an opportunity—to explore another world!”

“But good heavens, Will, why all the rush? Why don’t you wait a while? Why not organize a party—”

The light in his eyes was far-off, exalted, almost ecstatic. “No, no, I can’t wait! Can’t! Not one hour more than need be! I must get down there to see—to see *her!*”

As I saw the flushed, nervous manner in which he began ranging about the room, I knew that arguments would be futile. That lovely creature in the Great Cavern had caught him beyond my power to save! And when, a little later, I bade him farewell after vainly trying to extract some further details of his plans, it was with the feeling of one who leaves a soon-to-be-executed friend.

To this day, I doubt if he was fully aware of me as I sorrowfully shook his hand and slipped from the room.

“See, there she is again!” he cried, as he took his place at the eyepiece of his infernal machine. “There she is again! Good Lord! Isn’t she the most glorious thing God ever put on this earth!”

CHAPTER II

A Challenge to Death

TWO or three days after my talk with Will, a sensation was caused by the discovery of his Brighton coupe, parked in a barren gorge of the Whitley range, not far from the entrance of one of the many limestone caverns that thread the region.

As no man in his right mind would deliberately abandon his car in that desolate district, it was assumed that he had met with mishap or foul play; and searchers, scouring the hills or exploring the caves with lanterns, expected nothing better than to come across his mutilated remains.

However, no trace of him was found, except for a penknife which had evidently been dropped by chance deep in one of the caves, and which some of the party believed may have belonged to Will. But this point was never definitely decided; and after a time, for want of clues, the hunt was abandoned, and “the mysterious disappearance of William Claybrook” was accepted as a thing beyond human explanation, and was gradually forgotten.

Doubtless many of you will remember the newspaper story of the rescue of William Claybrook and an unknown woman, who were on the verge of death by starvation and exposure, many months later. But little, really, is known of the story behind that news item, or of the mystery of the whereabouts of Claybrook during the intervening months. It was assumed that he had lived, somehow, in a mountain retreat, but was finally forced to seek civilization again when his food supply was destroyed in a landslide.

But now, after the passage of more than two years, I have persuaded Will to let me publish the true story of his extraordinary adventures in the subterranean world fifteen miles below the surface, for he did

reach it.

I shall pass very briefly over the beginnings of his experience, since the sequel was so much more striking. After leaving his car, he plodded for hours through the caverns of the Whitley Range, weighed down with the fifty pounds of his pack, and guided by a map which he had made by means of the Pellucid Depth Ray.

From tunnel to remote connecting tunnel he forced his way by the beams of a flashlight; through passages so narrow that he had to crawl on hands and knees; over perilous watercourses; down sheer rock ledges, and into sections where no man had ever penetrated before. A dozen times he skirted the edge of death; fifty times he had to halt from exhaustion. Sometimes he lay on a limestone shelf for an hour or two of badly needed sleep; sometimes he fancied himself to be lost amid the labyrinths; but always he pressed on and on, and down and down and down—

It may have been partly through good luck that he at last reached his goal; though he maintained that it was all a matter of careful planning. At any rate, at a depth of more than five miles he faced his supreme difficulty. The heat at this point was torrid, the heavy air almost unendurable. He had stripped to the waist, and yet sweated continually; but still he forced his way on—until stopped by a solid barricade of rock. This he had seen through the Ray machine; and this he had prepared for by means of a stick of dynamite.

Personally, I would never have had the nerve to insert a charge of high explosive in that subterranean recess; but Will was prepared for just this act; he lit a time-fuse; retreated to what he thought a safe distance, and waited with more confidence than most men in his situation would have shown.

In that narrow corridor, the force of the explosion must have been terrific; Will admits that he was momentarily stunned. But the next instant, recovering himself, he felt a cool breeze blowing over him, and knew that he had blasted open the entrance to the Great Cavern.

In the Cavern itself, all was coal-black—which did not surprise Will, for he knew that the lights went on and off periodically, as if by a clockwork arrangement—sixteen hours on, and eight off, with the regularity of the Old Faithful geyser.

“Good! Luck’s with me!” he muttered to himself. Then cautiously he crept forward, feeling for his foothold inch by inch, for it would be unsafe to betray himself by a flashlight. After a perilous hour, he had groped his way out of the narrow corridor, and had the sense of great spaces opening about him, although everything was still as black as a blind man’s world.

From his observations with the Depth Ray, he knew that he had come out on the side of a hill, which he had termed the Golden Ridge, because of its peculiar tint. It was now his purpose to feel his way down the hillside, toward a cluster of bubble palaces; then, upon the return of the light, he thought, he could safely introduce himself to the natives.

But he had been a little too sanguine. No sooner had he entered the Cavern than a confusion of cries met his ears—cries of consternation and terror, which arose in a great disturbing chorus, some near, some far, punctuated by sharper screams and calls, as if the entire populace had been aroused.

This, however, Will was prepared for in a measure, since he could hardly have expected the noise of the explosion to go unnoticed. Yet he had not anticipated such a general alarm.

Beneath the overtone of agitated cries, there were rustlings and flutterings in the night; sounds as of feet pattering, of robes swishing, of excited movements to and fro.

Warily the intruder began to creep down the hill, feeling his way inch by inch; but he was conscious of presences all around him, of stealthy forms moving close at hand through the darkness. He had to use all his power of will not to betray himself by turning on a flashlight; but at the same time he felt, he almost knew that his movements were no secret to the invisible watchers.

“Gulm titsum gulm!”

THESE may not have been the exact syllables of the challenge that rang forth, abruptly, almost within arm’s length; but these were the words, as nearly as Will could afterward recall them.

Terrified, he stopped short.

“Gulm titsum gulm!”

Twice the phrase was repeated. Then a greenish phosphorescent light, larger than a man’s head, broke out just in front of him, not more than five feet away, with a dull uncanny illumination by which he could vaguely see a crowd of staring faces.

Wonder, dread and dismay were registered in those countenances. He could see how some of the spectators started back in repugnance, with cries as of men who have unexpectedly encountered a dangerous beast in the dark.

Sliding down to his hands and knees, Will tried to slip off into the shadows. But another phosphorescent greenish light burst out, and he saw that he was surrounded.

If ever he regretted his rash adventure, it was at that moment. His heart hammered; his breath came fast; he thought with bitter longings of the tunnel he had just left.

A moment passed, while he listened to the voices whispering; whispering rapidly and sibilantly, in that same unknown tongue. Then, out of the green-streaked shadows, a tall figure approached, carrying a machine that resembled a large insect-sprayer. He pressed a little bulb; a long tube, like a rifle-barrel, shot out toward the startled observer; and from this tube a rain of fine vapor was showered over Will.

The victim coughed; gasped; had a sensation as of strangling, with an odor as of garlic in his nostrils; then felt a numbness coming over all his limbs, and sank to earth, possessing no more power over his muscles than if they had belonged to some other person.

“Bult zimplot thim!” he heard a voice, rapid and excited. And two figures bent down and slipped heavy straps about him, until he was scarcely able to squirm; after which he felt himself being lifted, and borne away on several pairs of stout shoulders.

NOT until long afterward did he learn how he had been so swiftly found and captured. He did not as yet realize that his presence and exact location had been revealed by a machine known as the “Man Detector,” which recorded the faint electrical vibrations given off by the human brain, and so made it possible to discover the exact whereabouts of any man at a distance of several hundred yards.

Likewise, he did not know that the vapor-showering machine shot out a gas which, while leaving no permanent effects, temporarily paralyzed the motor nerve centers, but left the brain otherwise unimpaired. All that Will really understood, in that terrifying moment of his capture, was that he was helpless in the hands of beings endowed with unheard-of scientific powers.

For possibly two or three miles they carried him, through thoroughfares absolutely blank except for the circles of greenish phosphorescent light. He had no idea where he was being borne; he only knew

that he was accompanied by a crowd, for he could hear the padding footsteps, the low voices whispering in that queer-sounding tongue. Where were they taking him? To what new terrors? To what inescapable doom?

While these thoughts were sweeping through his mind, suddenly he was dazed by a flare of lights. The pitchy gloom of midnight had given place all at once to the silvery glow of day. Dazzled, Will did not realize for a moment that this was but the normal end of one of the eight-hour periods of darkness, the beginning of one of the sixteen-hour intervals of light. In bewilderment and wonder, he was staring up at a ceiling a thousand feet above, on which multitudes of bulbs flamed in pleasing geometrical patterns. He noticed again, as he had done through the Depth Ray, that the ceiling was supported by concrete columns which, tapering upward like inverted funnels, were each many yards thick at the base and were separated by intervals of close to a quarter of a mile. But, most of all, he was amazed at the palaces.

Mushroom-shaped and bubble-like, as he had seen them from above, and glowing iridescently with a light from within, they were like the temples of a dream world; and were far more beautiful now, in their pastel colorings of cream and lavender and amber and sky-blue, than when seen by means of the Depth Ray.

In the courts, between the buildings, flowers such as Will had never seen before were blooming: orange-yellow roses as big as dahlias, and blue-and-gold dahlias as large as a man's lap, and rainbow-hued blossoms of types that Will had never seen before; while lemon-winged birds flitted among the trees and sang with a melody surpassing the nightingale.

Now that he had a chance to see his captors, his fears began to leave him. These men, with their clear blue eyes, broad high brows and sensitive open countenances, did not look as if they would inflict deliberate cruelty; although their lips were set, and there was a stern and determined look on their faces as they jogged along at an unhurried pace.

AFTER a time, they paused before the largest building of all—an edifice of many-domed crystal, with cupolas and spires that changed constantly in color, in a manner to outrival the chameleon. Will had a glimpse of something that looked like an elevated railway, which ran behind the building; multitudes of individuals were gliding back and forth upon a lace-work bridge—a bridge composed of two great movable platforms, one running in each direction—the local means of solving the transportation problem!

He also had glimpses of other queer contrivances, including a deep chute from which men and women were hurled into air like corks from a popgun, to go drifting gracefully to the ground beneath shimmering parachutes. He was fascinated by the tubes which rose from the earth, and from which drafts of air were constantly pouring, as from the ventilators in the cabins of modern steamers; and, for the first time, it occurred to him that the temperature was pleasantly cool, although according to all calculations, considering the depth, it should have been insufferably hot.

But Will had little time for such thoughts and observations. He was carried through a small oblong doorway into the crystalline edifice; down a long arched corridor that glowed with translucent rose and gold, and into a great vaulted chamber where dozens of men in long flowing robes were squatted cross-legged on the floor.

On entering, each of Will's captors reached down and touched the floor three times with his left hand, while uttering what sounded like a mumbled prayer. Then, arising, they approached a platform in the center, where an impressive-looking individual was sitting, also cross-legged, upon a platform of purple velvet.

This dignitary, white-bearded and venerable-looking, and clad in a shining white mantle, looked down

at the newcomers with a grave and yet benignant expression.

“*Bludel? Bludel? Bludel?*” he said, in a manner of gentle inquiry; and fixed Will with a gaze of patriarchal authority.

Will’s attendants replied, with obvious meekness and respect; and pointed to him continually during the conversation, which lasted ten or fifteen minutes. One word kept recurring as they addressed the white-mantled one:

“*Thnur, Timur, Timur!*”

Will could not but recognize this as the name or title of the magistrate—for such he took the figure on the platform to be. And he had the uneasy sense that his fate was being decided.

But the decision, when it was made, remained a mystery to Will. Timur leaned down, pointed to the captive and made a series of slow and sonorous pronouncements, while his followers listened deferentially. Then the men bent down once more, and each touched the floor three times with his left hand; after which they started away, bearing their captive, still paralyzed, down a long, dimly illuminated gallery that slanted into the depths of the earth.

CHAPTER III

The People of the Abyss

AFTER being carried through endless labyrinths, Will was locked in a subterranean room, where he was to remain a prisoner for many weeks, while being regularly fed and cared for. Each day a long-robed dignitary arrived, who spent hours with him, teaching him the native language and customs; and thus after a time he was able to solve the mystery of the Great Cavern, and to learn who its people were and how they had come to dwell underground.

The country was called Le-Mur; and its people were descendants of the ancient Lemurians, who had inhabited the Pacific continent that sank beneath the ocean thousands of years before. At the time of the disaster, when tidal waves and volcanic eruptions of unparalleled violence were laying the country waste, a ruling caste of thousands of men and women had been able to retreat underground to cavern shelters which they had prepared against precisely this emergency—scientists having foretold the cataclysm many years in advance.

Equipped with all manner of mechanical devices, they had been able to survive even when the disturbance had sealed the galleries by which they had hoped to return to the upper world. They manufactured their food synthetically, creating carbohydrates, proteins and edible fats by the transformation of the mineral oil of the earth. They had a system of interatomic lighting, which kept their homes illuminated with but slight expenditure of energy. They maintained a fanning and ventilating system which worked perfectly, aided by the constant release of oxygen from various metallic oxides. They cooled their galleries by electrical refrigeration, employing the earth’s internal heat to generate the electricity. And they had gradually, in the course of many centuries, expanded their subterranean domains, which now reached for hundreds of miles, with interminable branching by-ways and corridors and occasional enormous caverns like the one which Will had discovered.

As generation after generation led its life underground, a prejudice had begun to arise against the sunlit world above—even a fear, a superstition against the People of the Upper Air, as the surface dwellers were known. In the early days, some of the Lemurians had indeed escaped from their cavern life, and had entered the “Upper Air,” never to be heard of again.

But as time went by, such escapes had been severely frowned upon, and at length had been forbidden, under threat of death; the tunnels connecting with the earth's surface, which had been built long before, were carefully sealed, and the very secret of their location was locked in archives known only to the Committee of Elders. "Le-Mur for the Le-Murs!" was the motto. To make contact with the peoples of the Upper Air, reasoned the statesmen of the Caverns, would be to end Le-Mur's blessed isolation, and to bring down no one knew what manner of "foreign plagues and devils."

FOR many centuries, according to the accounts Will heard, the life of Le-Mur had really been blessed. In their bubble palaces, the people had led an existence that was wise, sane and beautiful; protected from overcrowding by scientific regulation of population; and shielded from want by an equitable system of distribution, which gave to every one all that he required of every commodity, and allowed to all alike ample time for recreation and for pursuit of art, learning, and personal hobbies.

But of recent years, decay had set in. The life of Le-Mur, although still as smooth as ever on the surface, had been penetrated by a deep, gnawing disease, which was fast chewing away at the foundations. This was not, indeed, told to Will by his instructor; but this he was to learn, in a striking fashion, after he had been in Le-Mur for three months and had, through studious application, acquired a fair knowledge of the language.

He had often wondered for what end he was being trained; and why such evident care had been taken to drill him in both writing and speaking Le-Murian. But he assumed that the natives desired to learn from him something of his own country—if a Martian explorer were to arrive in America, would our first thought not be to teach him English? The main question in Will's mind was whether, once his training was completed, he would be kept a prisoner; or whether he would be released, to explore the cavern-world, and perhaps—perhaps!—to meet the fascinating woman he had seen by means of the Depth Ray.

One day, after a long session with his instructor, who pronounced his work "Satisfactory! Very satisfactory!", he received a summons, which sounded through a little speaking tube high up on the wall:

"The Timur desires an audience, the Timur desires an audience with the man of the Upper Air! Let him follow the yellow line, and take the violet Running Platform at the left-hand side of the third corridor to the right!"

No sooner had these words been spoken than, with a loud clattering, Will's prison door burst open. Emerging, he saw a line of yellow light, which he followed down several curving galleries, until he came to a place corresponding, roughly, to a railroad station on earth. Dozens of movable platforms, laden with passengers, were twisting in and out and halting for brief intervals in a sort of general depot.

Finding the violet platform, which was unoccupied, he stepped aboard, and dropped into a little seat. Almost instantly, as if under intelligent guidance, it began to move, and Will was shot up through a sloping tunnel and out upon a sort of causeway in the Great Cavern, from which he looked down upon the mushroom buildings.

It was only a few minutes before he stopped at the palace of many-domed crystal, with the chameleon towers constantly changing in color; and there he was met by an attendant in a shimmering blue robe, who raised both hands in salute, according to a local custom, and then motioned him in through a small oblong doorway such as he had entered before.

ONLY a minute later, he was standing before the Timur—who, as Will now knew, was the legal ruler of all Le-Mur, a king with powers that were not, indeed, absolute, but were somewhat broader than

those of the President of the United States.

Will was astonished to observe that he was being granted a private audience with this great dignitary; in fact, aside from four guards who stood, each with a long spear, at one corner of the room, he and the Timur were the only occupants of the great vaulted chamber.

As before, the sovereign was sitting cross-legged on a central platform; as before, he was impressive with his venerable appearance, white beard and shining white mantle.

For a moment, after Will's arrival, the Timur merely stood looking at him in a grave and troubled manner; and Will, trembling although he did his best to control himself, realized that some important announcement was in store, and that a crisis in his own life impended.

"Manu," the Timur at last said (this being an abbreviation of "Man of the Upper Air"), "for ages all contact with your race has been prohibited. Primitives such as you Upper Air folk could only cause damage down here in Le-Mur. Through our earth-piercing radiosopes, we have been watching your doings for centuries; and what we have seen of your wars, revolutions and intrigues has not been such as to make us desire your closer acquaintance. In fact, I am empowered, by a special law, to consign any intruder from the Upper Air to the Obliteration Rooms—"

"Obliteration Rooms?" gasped Will, with a sinking sensation. "What on earth may they be?"

"The rooms where those who do not deserve life are pierced with the Paralyzing Needle, which brings oblivion. But have no fear, Manu. It is not for this that I have summoned you here. I believe that the Providence which governs us all has brought you down to us at the crucial moment, for you can be of great service to all Le-Mur. Do you wish to know how?"

The brows of the Timur were wrinkled with solemn lines as he spoke; his deep blue eyes narrowed thoughtfully with a look of sorrow in which there was at the same time a spark of hope.

"Are you willing to take chances, Manu? Are you ready to risk your life for the sake of Le-Mur?"

As if to punctuate these words, the spears of the four guardsmen came down with a sudden clattering. Then, for a few seconds, a silence that seemed almost leaden ensued.

"Risk my life, O Timur?" queried Will, thinking that perhaps he had not properly caught the meaning of the words. "How so? For what reason?"

"You, Manu, can do what no native of Le-Mur can accomplish. Let me explain."

NERVOUSLY the Timur uncrossed and then crossed his legs again as he tilted his lean body far forward on his platform of purple velvet.

"First I must tell you some things about our country, Manu. We threaten today to split into halves—and a land that splits into halves is like an egg with its shell broken. My followers and I have tried to give the people a good rule, and to govern kindly and reasonably. But I have a great enemy, Murkambu by name, who has been organizing half of the land against me, and today threatens not only my own reign, but the well being of all Le-Mur."

The Timur shook his head sadly, and continued,

"The trouble has been brewing for centuries, and is only now coming to a head. You see, Murkambu represents the Science Party; and my followers and I are Anti-Science. Not that we are against science, actually; only that we believe that scientific advances should be restrained, that new inventions should be put to use only when they will be of value to the people as a whole.

“As you know, our civilization is already highly mechanized. We have not only machines, but machines to run the machines—and everything is managed so efficiently that we are hard pressed to find two hours’ work a day to occupy the average able-bodied citizen. Under these circumstances, we hold that further labor-saving devices are worse than useless.”

“Looks that way to me, too,” concurred Will.

“Ah! So then you agree with me! Good!” exclaimed the Timur, his eyes darting lively fires at his visitor. “Then you’ll be so much the better for the secret assignment!”

“What secret assignment?” demanded Will, apprehensively.

“I’m coming to that, I’m coming to that,” the ruler rattled on. “First let me tell you about Murkambu and his Science Party. They believe every new invention should be used to the full, no matter how many men it leaves unemployed and how it throws our life out of its orbit. Whether or not we can digest it, it should be thrown on the market!—as if a man should devour all the food he could lay hands on, even when his stomach was full! Of course, the explanation is that Murkambu and his group—hogs that they are!—are bent on nothing but their private profits.”

“But if every one has all he wants anyhow, why should they care about private profits?”

The Timur threw up his hands in a despairing gesture.

“Why, indeed, Manu, except that men have the appetites of hungry dogs, no matter how they are fed? However, Science or Anti-Science—that is after all a political issue, and should be settled reasonably. But a reasonable settlement is the last thing Murkambu wants. He is—to do the devil justice—as brilliant a leader as Le-Mur has ever seen. Owing to his genius for organization, his oratorical talents, his wealth and his unscrupulousness, he has formed a powerful revolutionary party, a real threat against the government of Le-Mur—in fact, it has already usurped hundreds of square miles of territory. The Science platform is, of course, only a rallying call, although it has added many wolves and vultures to the rebel ranks. But Murkambu’s real desire is to overthrow the established order, to drive me from power, and to take control of the whole country!”

THE Timur tossed angrily on his purple platform as he spoke; his fists clenched and unclenched in nervous spasms. But there seemed to be no relevancy in his words as he went on, impulsively:

“So that is why—that is why, Manu, I have sent for you!”

“That is why you have sent for me?” repeated Will dully. “How so, O Timur?”

“It is like this,” the ruler hastened. “Murkambu’s faction is so powerful that I fear we may not be able to cope with it. Least of all, if it strikes suddenly—one of the ‘terror-blows’, which, I understand on the best authority, Murkambu has worked out in secret with his lieutenants. The stroke may be withheld indefinitely; or may fall at any time. That is, frankly, what worries me. If we could only learn the date of the impending outbreak, we would be in a better position to suppress it.”

“But can you not learn, O Timur?”

The ruler sighed.

“Perhaps you can answer that for us, Manu. You see, we have already sent out many spies. But all were discovered by means of the Man Detector—which is very sensitive, and, as you know, reveals any human presence within several hundred yards. You, being from the Upper Air, are the only one who can get around this barrier—”

“But did the Man Detector not locate me the moment I entered your world, O Timur?”

A wan smile came to the sovereign’s lips.

“That is not what I mean, Manu. Of course, your presence would be detected. But Murkambu and his Science men would have no reason to suspect you of being a government agent. You could claim to have escaped from us, and to be our enemy; and so could enter where none of us could go, and learn secrets hidden from our eyes. With skill and luck, you might even discover the intended date of the Revolution.”

“So you wish me to be a spy, O Timur?”

“Call it what you will. But is it not for a noble purpose—to save our civilization from the plotters who scheme to wreck it?”

Will stared up at that tormented and yet benevolent face, marked with a patriarchal benignity; and had an instant conviction that the Timur had been speaking the truth, and did indeed represent the forces of light in their battle with evil.

“Do not let me coerce you, Manu,” the voice went on, sorrowful and low. “I would not intimidate you, if I could—of what value to us would an agent be unless he went of his own free will?”

Over Will’s mind there flashed a thought of the dangers involved; and his heart sank as he wondered how he could overcome the monstrous difficulties of maneuvering among strangers, a detective in an unknown world.

But the Timur had fixed him with a gaze that was imploring, almost magnetic. The two eyes fairly blazed with eagerness, with desire; and it seemed to Will that he could not bring to his tongue a protesting “No!” Besides, was there not some voice of adventure within him that cried out, “Yes, go, go!”

And so he heard himself replying, almost as if some automatic power within him had taken hold of his tongue: “Tell me more, O Timur—more of what you would have me do.”

The Timur leaned forward again; smiled and grunted an approving:

“Good! I could see you were no coward, Manu!” And somehow, at those words, Will knew that he was committed to the adventure.

CHAPTER IV

At the Enemy’s Castle

MURKAMBU, known by his friends as “The Oracle” and “The Shining Leader” and by his enemies as “The Fury,” sat behind a great steel-topped desk in the Hall of Science of his private mansion. All about him, along the walls of the enormous domed room, were tiny models of machines—curious devices of wheels, coils, rods, boilers, and weblike masses of wires corresponding to nothing ever seen in the world above. Engines shaped like butterflies, and others that looked like giant frogs, and still others that were bat-shaped or spider-limbed or mosquito-like, dangled from cables suspended from the ceiling, giving the place a little of the appearance of a museum of monsters and monstrosities.

Thoughtfully Murkambu stroked his square, cleft chin with a lean, nervous hand; brushed back the

long, dyed black hair that fell untidily about his wide, low forehead; and, with his hawk eyes glittering keenly on either side of his hooked nose, stared at an attendant who, clad in the mud-yellow of the servant class, had just entered through the oblong door at the further end of the room.

“What is it, Gramm?” he demanded, as the servant raised one hand high above his head in token of respect.

“Leader,” said Gramm, in oiled, deferential tones, “it is nothing much. Only a fugitive who claims to have escaped the Timur’s clutches, and begs leave to throw himself at your feet.”

Murkambu leaned far back among the cushions of his chair, smiled faintly, and asked, indifferently:

“Why must he see me? Will not one of the sub-Councillors serve?”

“But this is a different sort of fugitive, O Leader. Do you not remember hearing of the man who came months ago from the Upper Air—”

Murkambu shot forward in his seat with a start. His flashing eyes were all alertness as he broke in.

“Oh, so the man from the Upper Air has escaped and wishes to see me?”

“Yes, O Leader!”

“Show him in at once!”

While Gramm hastened out, Murkambu arose, and, with his hands folded behind his back, began slowly pacing along the aisle between two monster machines whose wide-open shark-like jaws had been painted a bloody red.

IT was little more than a minute, however, before Gramm returned, in company with a rail-thin six-footer, whose eyes blinked curiously from behind their tortoise-rimmed spectacles. His clothes—which were of a style never seen in Le-Mur before his arrival—were ragged and torn; his face was bristly with a several days’ growth of beard.

“O Leader, I throw myself before you!” he said, using the local formula of respect, but speaking with a foreign accent that brought a dim smile to Murkambu’s face.

“Be seated!” invited the latter, pointing to a mat on the floor, where the newcomer squatted cross-legged, while Murkambu returned to his cushioned chair, where he sat perched like an emperor.

“What is it that brings you here to see me, Manu?”

“O Leader, I was kept in confinement by my enemy, the Timur. Yesterday the prison door was left ajar by accident, and I slipped away. I stole through deep labyrinths for many miles, crawling through holes like a rat, lest I be re-captured. At last I came up near your palace, and having heard of you as a great and noble captain—”

“Who told you that?” inquired Murkambu, abruptly.

“I knew you must be. O Leader, since every one mentioned you as the enemy of my enemy, the Timur, against whom I have vowed vengeance for the sufferings he has caused me.”

As he spoke, Will kept his eyes downcast toward the granite floor, seemingly in token of respect. He was remembering how he had rehearsed this very speech; how he had prepared it with the Timur himself; how he had purposely torn his clothes and bestrewn them with dirt and dust; how, with the Timur’s aid, he had crept into an underground corridor leading toward Murkambu’s palace; and how, emerging from

this tunnel, he had inevitably been found by Murkambu's men, who had thus made the present interview possible.

“What is your object in seeing me, Manu?”

Cool, crisp, skeptical, the tones of Murkambu were not those of a man easily duped.

“Whom else should I see, O Leader? Who else could help me so well to avenge myself? I come to offer you my services. My life is at your disposal—and if anything I can do can help by so much as a hair's breadth to put down that tyrant—that devil—that—”

Awkwardly Will paused; for, with his limited Le-Murian vocabulary, he had run out of epithets by which to characterize the Timur.

But he beat his fist angrily in air, and bit his lip to emphasize his fury; and Murkambu, peering at him keenly, uttered a satisfied grunt, and declared:

“Good! I believe you, Manu! Why should you feel anything but rage at the Timur, after the reception he gave you? He is your enemy because he fears that you, with your knowledge of Upper Air inventions, might hurt the cause of Anti-Science. But we of the Science Party will know how to value you! We will welcome any secrets you may tell us of Upper Air inventions!”

“O Leader, I know little about inventions. But I will help as much as I can!”

“Then it is a promise, Manu!”

MURKAMBU spoke with an ominous rumbling. His hawk eyes were two black threatening fires that caused Will to shudder in spite of himself.

“Remember, then, it is a promise—and no man can break a promise to Murkambu and expect to live!”

“It is a promise, O Leader!”

“Then lift your left hand, Manu, and repeat these words after me. They are the oath of allegiance to the Science Party.”

Will duly lifted his left hand, and mumbled several syllables after Murkambu; whereupon the leader, turning to Gramm, instructed:

“See that he is given suitable quarters, and dressed in the official Science uniform. After that, let him report to me for further instructions.”

“It shall be as you say, O Leader,” promised Gramm, saluting.

Will, as he turned to leave, could not see the sharp inquiring glance with which Murkambu's eyes followed him.

It is probable, in fact, that he would not have seen a mountain had it risen from the solid earth at that moment. For the oblong door ahead of him had opened, and a vision that caused his heart to flutter crazily had come gliding in.

For the first startled instant, he did not know if it were merely a ghost—merely the deluding creature

of his own dreams. But it was more beautiful than any dream—here, in warm flesh and blood, was that superb creature who had brought him to Le-Mur!

No! there could be no doubt that it was *she*, with the big lustrous violet eyes beneath the pale auburn-crowned brow, the smile of beaming innocence, the fragrance and radiance that only the Chosen One can shed upon any man!

Will stopped short in his tracks at the sight; while she, casting him a glance of smiling curiosity and wonder, passed lightly on her way.

But he did not fail to notice what a deep obeisance Gramm made to her.

“Who may she be,” he asked, as soon as he could regain control of himself, “a lady of high rank?”

“Of the very highest, Manu! May the gods bless her and preserve her! She is the youngest and favorite daughter of our leader, Murkambu.”

At this information, Will staggered a little, and felt as if a bolt had hit him. “Her name is Ilwanna,” went on Gramm, who was evidently full of the subject. “Ilwanna, the Enchantress. She is known throughout Le-Mur as one of the fairest and wisest of our daughters. Although she is still very young, it is said that never have the fates given any woman a quicker, cleverer mind. In truth, Manu, she is so skilled in science that she has already made several extraordinary inventions.”

“Is that—is that why they call her the Enchantress?”

“Yes, Manu, for that reason—and also because of her great beauty. Artists without number have thrown themselves down at her feet, begging to paint her—”

“And is she,” demanded Will, rushing on to the question that concerned him most of all, “is she, by any chance—married?”

“She might be so many times over, Manu, if she accepted all the offers that are made her.”

“But she has refused them all?”

“Thus far, Manu. Governors of provinces, statesmen and princes have thrown themselves down before her, but she has rejected all alike. She is wedded, she says, to Science.”

Will groaned. If she had frowned on celebrities of her own race, what chance had he? What chance had he in any case, since she was the child of the very man he had been sent to spy upon?

Already he foresaw the dreadful dilemma that was to confront him: of loyalty to the Timur, to whom he had given his pledge, and who represented justice and right; or loyalty to the love that had brought him to Le-Mur. But how could it be that a girl so radiant, so unspoiled and apparently so innocent as Ilwanna could spring from so black a source as Murkambu?

THESE were the thoughts that occupied Will’s mind during the next half hour, when Gramm led him into a long underground storage room and fitted him with the official Science uniform: an affair of black and white stripes, with a close-fitting sleeveless jacket and a sort of kilted skirt that ran only to the knees. The material, of a cobweb lightness and softness, was of the same synthetic substance as all the Le-Murian garments, combining the elasticity of rubber with the downiness of floss.

“Now we’ll take you back before the Leader, Manu,” said Gramm, surveying the results approvingly. “You’re coming to look at last like a man!”

Murkambu echoed the same view a few minutes later, when he gazed at the striped figure who was ushered back before his desk. "It's strange what a difference clothes make in a man," he meditated. "Why, one would almost think you had been bred among civilized people, instead of in that barbarous Upper Air!"

And then, with a swift change of manner:

"Now to business, Manu! I don't mind confessing I've taken quite a fancy to you, and for that reason I'm appointing you one of the Councillors of the Science Party."

"Councillor of the Science Party?" demanded Will with a start. "How so?"

Gazing at those hawk eyes, which peered out from beneath the black untidy hair as if they would have liked to devour him, Will could hardly believe that here was a man who was favoring him out of mere personal sentiment.

"How so, Manu? Well, it is this way. You come from a land that has far surpassed our own in all the arts of savagery. Judging from what our instruments show of your world, we are mere infants when it comes to spreading fear, destruction and death. Our proposed 'terror-blow', which we hope to deliver against the Timur, would benefit greatly by your Upper Air expertness in atrocities. That is my chief reason for appointing you a Councillor, Manu."

"But what will my duties be, O Leader?"

"As a Councillor, you will have to inspect our secret preparations for the Revolution, and to suggest improvements, based on your Upper Air knowledge. Thus you may give us the advantage of brutalities beyond our wildest imagination. Thus, also, you may reap revenge upon the Timur! Is it not so, O Manu?"

"It is so, O Leader!"

"Then go with Gramm, and he will lead you into the Annihilation Corridors, and the Fifth Basement, and the other pits where we prepare our attacks against the Timur. Look close and carefully, Manu! Do not hesitate at any suggestions. Remember—nothing is too terrible to try! Our motto is, 'To make our dreams come true, let us sow a crop of nightmares!' So out with your Upper Air bestialities! A man with your background will not disappoint us, Manu!"

"I am sure not, O Leader!"

"Then go! On the second day after tomorrow, I will expect you here to report! Now make haste! Look carefully! Think well! For if you show skill and wisdom, you may rise high in the Science Party!"

With an abrupt gesture, Murkambu waved Will and his attendant away. But the newly appointed Councillor, as he started off down the aisle amid the weird intricacy of machines, was torn between conflicting feelings. Here, in his official role with the Science Party, was an ideal opportunity to gain all the desired information for the Timur. But here also was the chance—if he were treacherous enough—to work his way up in the good graces of the Party, to earn the gratitude of Murkambu, and perhaps in the end, if all went well, even to win his way with Murkambu's daughter.

Muttering an oath, Will fought down this temptation. And, at the same time, he reached the end of the aisle; and, glancing back, received a faint shock. For was it true, or did he only imagine that the hawk eyes of Murkambu were following him with a gleam of amusement, and that the Leader chuckled beneath his breath?

CHAPTER V

Murkambu Weaves

WILL stood in a low-roofed basement which, smelling like a chemical laboratory, reached for hundreds of yards, its concrete roof supported by multitudes of steel columns. Along the floor, which was paved with granite, thousands of men were creeping on their hands and knees, or lay full-length, wriggling like snakes. Back and forth they twisted and squirmed in coordinated maneuvers, their lines looking like enormous pythons; while, as if to complete the reptilian impression, they gave out a low hissing sound as they moved, accompanied by a rustling as of lithe legless bodies gliding along the earth.

“This is our Rattlesnake Battalion, our Crawl Troopers,” rang out the voice of Sub-Councillor Wincu of the Science Party, as he proudly took the new member on a tour of inspection. “It is our theory that, by creeping and sliding underfoot, these will take the enemy by surprise. They will move best in the darkness, protected by an Anti-Ray machine which will neutralize the Man Detector.”

Shuddering, Will watched the maneuvers of these creeping squadrons; and recalled how, for days already, he had done nothing but observe Murkambu’s preparations for the Revolution. Certainly, the arrangements were thorough! How would the Timur be able to defend himself? What defense would he have, for example, against the so-called Budding Bomb, which broke up into half a dozen scattering parts, each of which in turn scattered into six or eight more parts, before forty or fifty distinct explosions occurred? Or how would he be able to cope with the Electrolizing Ray, the heat of which caused the instant dissociation of water into hydrogen and oxygen—a reaction which was reversed an instant later, when the two gases, with a devastating explosion, reunited to form water vapor? Again, how fight against the Hysterical Spray, which broke down the nervous systems of the victims, and caused them to go off into wild hysterical outbursts, from which the only release was in death?

“Diabolical! Simply diabolical! Guess the devil himself couldn’t do much worse! Murkambu doesn’t need any help from the Upper Air!” Will told himself, as he observed the various war machines. Was it not his duty to inform the Timur of these new weapons? Yes! Clearly, he must slip away to the ruler’s palace at the first opportunity!

But this was more easily decided upon than accomplished. It seemed merely accidental, for he was apparently allowed every liberty; but whenever he started toward one of the exits leading into the Timur, a guard with a spear would be blocking the way; or else the entrance would be sealed, or surrounded with impassable pits. During the night (the eight-hour period when the lights were off) Will often thought of stealing away; but always the door of his little underground sleeping chamber would be locked—to guard him “against intrusion,” he was told. However, he reassured himself with the thought, “I’ll get away when the proper time comes,” and, in growing horror, went on with his inspection of Murkambu’s war machine.

SEVERAL times, during those days, he had caught sight of a figure that made him almost forget his duty to the Timur. Several times he had seen Murkambu’s daughter, graciously smiling as ever, as she entered her father’s home—a light, tripping, ethereal being, who seemed so wholly in keeping with this world of tinted, vari-colored palaces, so out of tune with the black designs brewing beneath the surface of those very palaces!

Was there not some way for him to speak with this delightful person, to make her acquaintance? At first he doubted it, for she would go drifting past as if he did not exist; and even when she glanced in his direction, her smile would seem to go right through him. Probably he was a mere cipher in her eyes, he reflected bitterly; he was in the position of a serf who courts the favor of a duchess!

But somehow—though the result might be his humiliation, or his lodgement in a dungeon—he must break down the barrier. He pondered long as to ways and means; but, the more he thought, the more entangled he became in schemes and counter-schemes. And then one day—quite by chance, as it seemed—the problem solved itself.

He had just left Murkambu's palace, after a brief interview with the Leader; and was strolling down a winding walk among pale green and blue fountains. As he turned the curve made by a clump of pansies as tall as a man and with blossoms as large as saucers, he heard light footsteps approaching; and his heart began to beat with a crazy pitter-patter as he came face to face with the very person he hoped and yet dreaded to meet.

He noticed that she smiled as she saw him, with a rippling, ingratiating smile that overspread her entire face; and was about to pass on when Will, feeling her to be not at all unfriendly, made a desperate effort to seize the opportunity.

She came to a halt, her violet eyes widening with surprise.

“What is it, Runtub?” she asked this word being equivalent to our “Sir.”

Will, confronted with this direct question, experienced the most embarrassing moment of his life. Imagine his position! he had stopped this lady, yet had nothing to say to her! He had merely the overwhelming sense that here was the object of his hopes, his thoughts, his dreams! Here was the one whom he had come so far and experienced such perils to meet! And now that he had met her at last, his mind refused to work; not an idea came to his brain, nor a sound to his lips, other than a half articulate muttering!

A SECOND or two that seemed endless went by. Will's stunned mind began to recover, and words were forming on his tongue, when he saw the amused smile that broke out on her face, heard her faint tittering, and knew that, in another moment, she would burst into outright laughter.

Then, indeed, he could have wished to sink into the earth! Then, indeed, he could have desired to be a thousand miles from Le-Mur! Yet, the next instant, with a resolute effort, he regained control of himself; overcame his bewilderment; and, though still embarrassed, spoke out of a stern inner necessity—out of the knowledge that, if he lost this opportunity, another would not speedily come.

“Ledala,” he said, “you must pardon me. I come, as you know, from the Upper Air, and speak your language but poorly. And so it is sometimes hard to put my thoughts on my lips.”

“That does not tell me why you wished to speak with me, Runtub,” she returned, casting him an arch sidelong glance out of those flashing violet eyes.

Her tones, he thought, were as soft as music; each phrase had a rhythm that was like song in his ears.

“No, it does not tell you why I wished to speak with you, Ledala.”

And then, as he asked himself what excuse to make, it came to him that no excuse was possible except the truth.

“Why should any one wish to speak with you, Ledala? Why, except that it brings pleasure? I should like to know you, Ledala—and if I am too bold, do not blame me too much. Say merely that it is because I am a barbarian from the Upper Air.”

Her clear, silver-toned laughter showed that she was not at all offended, merely surprised—and more amused than ever.

“No, Runtub, I do not think you a barbarian, I have often wondered if the Upper Air could be more barbarous than Le-Mur. And I have wondered what it would be like to speak to an Upper Air man. So I am not sorry you have spoken. I have often seen you passing through my father’s halls, and wanted to ask you a question, Runtub. What are those handsome bits of jewelry you wear over your eyes?”

“Bits of jewelry—over my eyes?” gasped Will, wondering if Ilwana was trying to make fun of him. And reaching impulsively toward his forehead, he felt his horn-rimmed spectacles.

“What are they, Runtub? Nobody here has anything like them. They are such lovely decorations. I think they make a man look *so* attractive!”

AS Will observed the girl’s approving smile, he felt grateful to nature for having made him near-sighted.

“Tell me, Runtub, something about your country,” Ilwana went on. “I have always wanted to know how it would feel to live in the Upper Air, with all those terrible open spaces above you—so huge that a person must feel lost! And that big light in the sky, which you call the sun, and the little lights called stars—tell me all about them, Runtub!”

Will pointed down a little curving walk toward a patch of lawn between clouds of pink oleander flowers.

“Let us go there,” he suggested, his heart beating fast at the unhoped-for opportunity. “Then I will tell you all—all you wish to know.”

They squatted cross-legged on the grass, according to the local custom; and Will, seeing that flawless youthful face upturned in a glance of beaming inquiry, hardly knew how to begin. But somehow the words struggled to his lips, and he went on and on, and told of the earth above, its ships and its factories, its great cities and wide countrysides, its hills and rivers and mountains; and she listened fascinated, breaking in every now and then with:

“Oh, that must be glorious, Runtub!” or, “How I should like to see that with *my own eyes!*”

“Perhaps you will yet see that with your own eyes!” suggested Will; and already wild, impossible plans were forming in his mind. Now that he was face to face with her, and saw how the violet eyes sparkled with an ever-varying light beneath their long flickering lashes, he felt more hopelessly in love than ever, more completely her captive, more utterly chained to whatever part of the earth she might inhabit. Never, never, he thought, could he go back to his own land without her!

He did not know how long he remained with her; it seemed only a few minutes, but may actually have been an hour or two. With rare speed, their acquaintance ripened; having heard much about the Upper Air, she began to tell him many things he did not know about Le-Mur, as well as some things about herself, and how, having taken to science from her early teens, she had had the advantage of her father’s laboratory, and had made experiments in chemistry at an age when most girls had no thought except for the cut of their dresses and the arrangement of their hair.

She was enchanted to learn that he too was a scientist, an inventor.

“Most of the men I meet in my father’s home are old statesmen,” she said. “And I hate statesmen, Runtub. They are like spiders—always weaving webs.”

“Do not call me, Runtub,” he urged. “My name is Will.”

“Will? Will?” she repeated, smiling at the odd sound. “It has a pleasant ring on the tongue.”

“And I will call you Ilwana,” he dared to suggest—when he saw her leap up with a start, her eyes widening in surprise, wonder, and alarm.

“What is it?” he demanded, as he too sprang to his feet. And then, turning, he saw.

TRACING them with a smile that was almost Mephistophelian in its suavity, stood the girl’s father, his hawk eyes flashing more keenly than ever, and his hooked nose seeming preternaturally long as it bent toward them like a beak. How many minutes he had been standing there, overhearing their talk, neither of them could say; but furious blushes came to the cheeks of them both, and they gaped and were wordless beneath his ironical scrutiny.

“Do not let me disturb you, my children,” he said, in tones that were low, and surprisingly mild considering the outburst they had expected. “I hope you have been enjoying yourselves.”

“I just came upon her by accident, O Leader,” Will attempted to explain, still expecting a reprimand. “I was—asking her some questions—”

“It is well, Manu. You are a man, are you not—and what man could resist my daughter’s loveliness? As a matter of fact, I was about to introduce you, as I wish you to teach Ilwana some of the Upper Air secrets. You will do that for me, will you not, Manu?”

“If you command it, O Leader, how can I refuse?”

“I do command it. Bless you, my children! Make good use of your time!”

Was it that there was just a faint note of sarcasm in his voice? Was it that there was something slightly sardonic in the twist he gave his black moustache, and in the wrinkling of his heavy cynical lips as he nodded, turned, and passed out of sight behind the clouds of oleander blossoms?

Such were the questions that Will and the girl silently asked as they faced one another again. A shadow had fallen between them; and though they tried to resume their conversation where they had left off, they could not regain their former cheerfulness.

CHAPTER VI

The Net Closes in

“I NEVER saw anything like it,” said Gramm to his wife Ulu. “No, may I be dropped into the deepest pit and buried alive if I ever saw anything like the way this young Manu runs after Her Loftiness the Lady Ilwana. By my head! If they are not always together!”

“Let the cavern roof drop upon me, if that is not disgraceful!” returned Ulu, with a sigh. “What is coming over our Leader? Of old, you know, the man who looked at Ilwana out of the corner of one eye was as likely as not to end in the Obliteration Rooms!”

“True enough, wife! Yet did the Leader not give a reception for the Manu but a few days ago, and did the young upstart not openly, shamelessly pass most of his time with the Lady Ilwana? Did I not come across the two of them but a day or two later, huddled side by side beneath a bamboo clump, whispering as though there was no one but the two of them in the whole world? Did I not see them this very morning, behind one of the columns beyond Murkambu’s palace? And what were they doing? Looking into each other’s eyes as if charmed, and holding hands? Did you ever hear of anything so shameful?”

“By the hem of our Leader’s robe!” mourned Ulu. “What is the world coming to?”

This conversation only echoed what was coming to be common gossip. For, although it was only a few weeks since the Upper Air man and Ilwanna had met, they were seen everywhere together—which was a source of great surprise, since Murkambu was known to have been very particular about the company his daughter kept, and to have restricted her men friends to princes and high-ranking politicians. Could it be, people wondered, that he would permit the beauty who had refused so many titled hands to succumb to a mere nobody, a foreigner?

Will himself, amid the delirium of his love, scarcely asked such questions. It was enough for him that he could see Ilwanna almost as often as he pleased; enough for him that she seemed to reciprocate his affection! Surely, as they say, love is blind! Otherwise, he would have known that a naked sword was dangling above his head, would have realized that he was only being played with, as a cat plays with a mouse.

All too soon the bubble was to burst! And the blow, when it fell, was to descend with unexpected savagery.

He had not, it is true, forgotten his pledge to the Timur; nor forgotten the threatened Revolution, which might wreck the life of Le-Mur. But as day after day went by, and no Revolution broke out, he was lulled into a false sense of security; and began to feel that perhaps after all, despite all Murkambu’s preparations, there would be no actual outbreak.

“Another case,” he thought, “of the barking dog that does not bite!” In the end, the Timur might not need his aid—and there might be no conflict between his duty to the ruler and his love for Murkambu’s daughter!

Then rudely, in one moment, came the awakening. He had just come from a meeting with Ilwanna—a meeting in which, for the first time, he had taken her into his arms, had urged his love upon her, felt the responsive pressure of her arms, and heard her murmured promises of devotion. A man in the state in which he found himself after that meeting can hardly be said to be normal; his head whirled, his thoughts floated on clouds, he scarcely knew that there was a solid earth beneath his feet. And then, breaking into his ecstasy like a bombshell, came cruel realization.

He had received a summons, as many times before, from Sub-Councillor Wincu:

“See me at once!”

Making his way into the cavern-like room that was Wincu’s headquarters, he was handed a slip of paper on which a few words were written in the up-and-down style of Le-Mur.

“Read and destroy,” murmured Wincu.

He read:

“You are instructed to report at light-fall on the day after tomorrow at the tenth column to the right of these headquarters for R-day activities.”

“R-day,” as Will understood only too clearly, meant “day of the Revolution.”

The decisive blow against the Timur was less than forty-eight hours away!

IN a room of opalescent glass, whose shimmering pearly walls curved about them like an enormous bell, Murkambu sat face to face with his daughter. His expression was determined, bitter, angry, with just a suggestion of savagery in the way in which he bit into his lower lip; while the girl’s cheeks were flushed,

her lovely small lips drooped sullenly, and she shrank back on her cushion on the onyx floor, her violet eyes wide open with fear.

“What is that?” her father shot out at her, pushing his square jaw forward with a bulldog thrust. “You dare to defy me?”

“It is not that I defy you,” she pleaded, withdrawing from him as far as possible. “It is only that—that I will not act like a traitor!”

“Traitor?” he echoed, giving the word an ironic ring. “Is it nothing, then, to play the traitor to *me*? Listen, my girl! Why do you suppose I have been throwing you in the way of this crawling rat from the Upper Air? Why do you suppose I have been making it easy for you to meet?—keeping you around the palace after he arrived, and using a thousand wiles so that you two might see one another? Was it that I wanted my daughter thrown away on such foreign trash? You know me better than that, Ilwana! You knew very well I had my own ends to fulfill!”

“I knew nothing of the kind!” she flashed back, with spirit.

“From the beginning,” went on Murkambu, his voice grown suave, in the manner of one who hides a dagger beneath every word, “did not my secret agents tell me all about him? Did I not know he was a spy?—a spy sent here by the Timur to ferret out my secrets? Was I deceived for one moment by the perfidy in his heart?”

“I do not believe it!” denied Ilwana, her tiny clenched fists indignantly shaking. “Will—that is, the Manu—is not perfidious!”

“No? Well, that is a matter for me to judge!” roared the Leader. “Do you think I could not have crushed him at any moment like a fly between my two hands? But why did I not do so? Not because I would have had any more compunction than about stepping on any other worm! No! Because it is bad policy to kill a man when he has valuable information that one may drag out of him!”

THE girl’s breath came short and fast beneath the pressure of her terror; but she remained silent, staring at her persecutor.

“Being in the Timur’s employ, has he not some of the secrets of his master? The secrets of defense—which my spies have not been able to fathom, because of the Man Detector? Then how can I find out what he knows? Not by direct questioning! Possibly not even by torture! But there is a simpler, softer way. And that is where you come in, Ilwana. The charm and seductiveness of a woman—will they not extract that which scourges and dungeons are powerless to drag from a man?”

With an exclamation of anger, Ilwana was on her feet. Her shapely head tossed proudly; her eyes were ablaze as she confronted her parent.

“Oh! So you wish me to act as a decoy to lure him for your ends?”

Murkambu too had arisen. But his manner was controlled, and his tones were quiet as he replied, with just the slightest suggestion of irony:

“Well, my lady, that is one way of putting it. In any case, he is now ripe for probing. I can see it in those silly glances he casts at you—ha, ha, as if you were the only thing in female shape that ever walked this earth! He got to the stage of imbecility even sooner than I expected. So now, Ilwana, with just a little cleverness, you can learn what I want you to, and then bring me the information. It is little enough for your father to ask of you.”

“I—I do not enjoy being used as a tool!” retorted Ilwana. She was recalling how, from her earliest days, Murkambu had tried to make use of her for his own purposes: how he had employed her as a bait for his political rivals, whom he had permitted to court her, while drawing advantageous agreements out of them; how he had secretly betrothed her, in the face of her tearful protests, to the doddering old Baron Grimlok, before the would-be bridegroom had, fortunately for her, been removed by a stroke of apoplexy. She remembered how she had never, from childhood, had a word of fatherly affection from this redoubtable parent of hers, and how she had always feared him, and felt that he regarded her as but one of his many possessions.

And so her breast swelled indignantly, and a feeling that was near to hatred mingled with her dread as she stood there confronting him beneath the pearly walls of that bell-shaped room. But chiefly it was not for herself that she was angry and afraid.

“And what—what will you do with *him*?” she demanded.

“With him? What does one always do with spies? Do you think I would let him live in any case, after the advances he has made to my daughter?”

She compressed her lower lip, and made a resolute effort to keep back the tears.

“Why, it’s—it’s ungodly!” she at length forced out, with something like a sob.

“Not at all, my girl. Merely good politics. Now will you go to him, like a loyal daughter of mine, and get me that information? If you refuse, well—you will not enjoy my locking you in the Black Tower for a month, as it has been my unfortunate duty to do once or twice before. Also, if you refuse—there will be no use prolonging the life of this earthworm from above. I will have him sent this very day to the Obliteration Rooms!”

“Oh, not this day!” she pleaded, almost in a wail. “Please give us time!”

“Then will you go to him, and get me that information? He is now in the sub-storage department, beneath the Violet Pavilion. If you will go out this way, my lady—”

With the greatest urbanity, Murkambu had reached toward the knob of a little oblong door.

“Just out this way. That’s it. I knew you were a good daughter after all. You’ll find it much more pleasant, really, than going to the Black Tower. Well, take your time. I’ll give you till evening, when you’ll find me in my study in the Hall of Science. But don’t forget—I’ll expect some really *valuable* information!”

Choking down a sob, Ilwana turned and hastily went out.

WILL meanwhile was wrinkling up his brows and chewing at his lips as he restlessly paced the floor in the sub-storage department beneath the Violet Pavilion. Rarely had any man had to do battle with a more heartrending problem. Since R-day was at hand, it was clearly his duty to rush off and inform the Timur, so that he might take immediate steps to defend himself. Upon this might depend the well-being, the future of all Le-Mur! Yet to fulfill his pledge to the Timur would be to prove unfaithful to his love for Ilwana.

How would she be able to forgive him for dashing off without a word to her? How forgive his treachery to her father? What explanation could he possibly offer that would make him appear anything better than a contemptible spy and traitor?

Compared to the warm reality of Ilwana, how pale and unimportant the Timur and his cause now

seemed! Yet never in his inmost heart did Will have any doubt of his course. He saw before him the Timur's patriarchal face, white-bearded and lined with trouble; contrasted it with the shrewd, cynical face of Murkambu; and knew in what direction his duty lay. Before his mind flashed the lines of a poet of centuries before, "I could not love thee, Dear, so much loved I not honor more"; and he knew that he too must follow the call of honor.

With a sigh, he started up the stairway into the Violet Pavilion. His senses were alert as a hunted beast's; while, trying to fight down the heaviness that weighed upon him like lead, he skirted a sentry-guarded door; veered aside from two spear-wielding guards who passed him with cold, suspicious glances; glided, without being seen, toward a trapdoor that he knew, and found it locked; and was about to hasten out of the Violet Pavilion when, startingly, he came face to face with a familiar figure.

But her breathless manner, her pale countenance, her contorted cheeks and hurried gestures told him that here was a creature very different from the serene self-assured Ilwana he had seen only a few hours before.

She did not take time for a formal greeting.

"Oh, thank the gods, it's you!" she exclaimed. And then, motioning him around a corner into a corridor of blue-veined marble where they could be by themselves, she whispered:

"Hurry! Fly! There's not one moment to spare!"

He stared at her bewildered, in mute inquiry, while she went on, still in a whisper, but with the most eager urgency:

"Fly, I say! They'll be after us! We've not one second to waste!"

Glancing down into those big shining eyes that brimmed with tears, Will demanded :

"*We? We've* not one second to waste?"

"Yes, *we*," she murmured; and her lips trembled, and he read the unutterable devotion in her gaze. "Make haste, make haste, my love. Whether we live or die, henceforth we will go together."

CHAPTER VII

Blow Follows Blow

THROUGH long underground passageways the lovers hurried, side by side. They descended and ascended stairways; slid down deep chutes; twisted through corkscrew tunnels; and crept into doorways so narrow that Will could barely force himself through.

"All Le-Mur is a labyrinth like this, beneath the main caverns," Ilwana explained. "Fortunately, I know my way about."

By hasty snatches, she explained to him the nature of his peril; explained, also, her sudden decision to flee with him.

"I have often thought of flying from my father," she said. "Here in Le-Mur we women are supposed to have equal rights; but actually I was his puppet, which he pulled upon a string. Therefore I am doubly glad to go with you—to the Upper Air—anywhere, my beloved—"

“But first I must go to the Timur,” Will confessed, gloomily. “How will you come with me, to your father’s mortal enemy—”

“He is not *my* mortal enemy, is he? Besides, he need not know I am my father’s daughter! I can disguise myself, can I not? Where do you think I am leading you now but to the home of my faithful old servant Sarpogu, who will take care of the change?”

A few minutes later, on the fifth level underground, they had entered a dingy ill-lighted den, where a wrinkled witchlike old woman threw her arms about Ilwana.

“Bless you, little daughter!” she exclaimed. “Where do you come from? What are you all in such a flutter about? Why, I have known you since you were no bigger than my forearm, yet never did I see you so excited before!”

“Sarpogu was my nurse for years, after my poor mother died,” Ilwana announced. And then, turning to the old woman, she whispered something into her ear; after which the two of them retired together, and were gone about a quarter of an hour.

When they returned, Will started forward with a gasp. Ilwana’s shimmering cobweb robe had given place to the drab muddy yellow costume of the servant class. Her auburn hair had been dusted over with gray, until it seemed to belong to an old woman. Her pale, flawless cheeks had been stained with a dye which, even on close approach, gave the impression of the ruts and wrinkles of age. She stooped slightly as she walked; and her wide-open mouth showed several blackened, decayed-looking teeth which, only a few minutes before, had been faultlessly white.

Had it not been for the twinkling violet eyes, Will would scarcely have known that this was Ilwana at all!

“Good for you!” he greeted her. “You are a splendid little actress!”

“We will need all the acting we can do,” she replied. And, turning, she thanked Sarpogu; received a small packet of condensed food from her hands; and urged, “Come, Will, let’s be going.”

EVERY minute, they knew, was precious. Perhaps by this time his absence, if not Ilwana’s, had been noticed; perhaps pursuers were already on their trail.

“Not until we are near the Timur’s palace will we be safe,” she whispered to him. “But come! I know every secret passageway!”

Crawling through a dimly lighted gallery that twisted like a serpent, she led him toward a large triangular gateway.

“Once we have passed this,” she said, “we will be under the protection of the Timur’s soldiers.” But, as they drew near, there came an ominous clanking; long spear-pointed bars drew down—and the path was blocked as solidly as by a row of bayonets.

Retreating, they tried another gallery; and this time, instead of the bristling bars, a heavy chain blocked their passage. On a third occasion, a barbed wire meshwork suddenly faced them; and, on the fourth attempt, a shower of arrows shot up from the earth, one of them almost impaling Will.

It was now only too clear that every path would be blocked. The floor of every gallery was planted with one of the so-called “electric mines” which automatically, at the lightest footfall, set up an impassable barrier.

Even as this realization came to them, Ilwana drew from the inner folds of her garments a little black

device no larger than a marble, which she thrust into one of her ears. Then, bending down to the gallery floor, she listened for several minutes.

Resuming an upright posture, she looked solemn, and more frightened than Will had yet seen her. Her disguise could not conceal the trembling of her hands, nor wholly hide the unusual pallor that had overspread her face. Nor could it keep her voice from faltering as she announced:

“It is as I feared. I hear the tramp of marching columns.”

“But how? How can you hear them?”

“Listen yourself, beloved!”

She gave him the black marble-sized object; and, putting it in one of his ears, he bent down as she had done.

Surely enough, a low, muffled tramp, tramp, tramp came to his ears!

“It is the Magnetic Sound Amplifier, which I myself invented,” she declared. “It attracts the waves of sound vibrating through the earth, and magnifies them more than a million times.”

But Will was not interested just then in scientific explanations.

“What is the meaning,” he gasped, “of the marching columns?”

She cast him a glance which made the answer only too evident.

“Our escape has been noticed,” was all she said.

But how avoid the approaching enemy? Obviously, no ordinary hideout would help them; for the Man Detector, with its remorseless rays, would uncover them more surely than would a pack of bloodhounds.

“There is just one last hope,” Ilwanna decided, slowly and reflectively. “On the eleventh layer underground—the lowest level—there is an old gallery which has not been used for years, having been condemned as unsafe. It may be that this has been overlooked, and is still barely passable. If you are willing to take the chance—”

“For myself—of course I am willing. But why must you run the risk?”

“Where you go, I go! Come, while we stand here debating, we may both be caught!”

AS if to testify to the truth of this assertion, the gallery roof trembled slightly.

“The troops—the troops march just above!” whispered Ilwanna; and, not daring to utter another word, she led the way downward.

They groped through a tunnel so steep that they had great difficulty in keeping their balance; and, after long loopings and windings, came to a circle of darkness resembling the entrance to a coal cellar.

“Surely enough, it *has* been forgotten!” exclaimed the girl, exultantly. “There is not one light burning!”

In Will’s eyes, the pitch-black entrance looked far from inviting. But he gritted his teeth; choked down his misgivings; murmured, “Good, let’s go on!”; and took out one of the flashlights that he had brought from the Upper Air (the other having been left at his headquarters at the Timur’s, for use in emergencies).

Leading the way, he pushed forward foot by foot. The tunnel was so narrow that two persons could

not move side by side; it twisted as sinuously as a coiled wire; it was filled with noisome odors, as of a long-closed basement; and was hot as a desert day, since the refrigeration system did not apply here.

Puffing, panting and sweating, Will had a sense of imprisonment, which only grew as he pressed on; a sense of impending catastrophe, which he could not shake off. Several times, turning to Ilwanna, he begged her to go back, in order to spare herself the torment and peril; but always her laughter rang out, clear and reassuring.

“And where is there that you can go, beloved, and I cannot follow?”

At last they came to a point so narrow that they doubted the possibility of further penetration.

“Better let me go ahead just a little to explore,” suggested Will, and forced his way forward a few yards. It was strange that his premonition of disaster, so active until now, was slumbering at this very moment when it should have been most awake!

“Wait, I’m coming too!” he heard Ilwanna crying. But almost before her weirdly echoing tones had died down, they were drowned by another sound, a sudden thundering and crashing, accompanied by such a shaking of the earth that Will was thrown off his feet. For several seconds the commotion continued, then subsided to a crunching and grating that rapidly faded out. But what was that scream which Will had heard or thought he had heard at the height of the tumult?

More startled and bewildered than hurt, he picked himself up; observed with a shock that everything about him had gone black; and, reaching automatically for his flashlight, found that the lens and light-bulb had been shattered as he fell.

“Ilwannal” he cried, in terror for her sake. “Ilwanna! Ilwanna!”

AS from an enormous distance, her voice came to him:

“Here I am, beloved! I am not hurt! But you—are you safe?”

“I am safe!” he shouted back. “Wait there for me! I am coming!”

Even as he started toward her, a sharp obstacle imposed itself in his way. His hands, groping in the darkness, felt a hard, irregular shape, as of a boulder. And above this shape he felt others, of huge size, the whole forming a massive barricade.

“Be careful, beloved, lest you displace other rocks!” he heard Ilwanna’s voice coming to him in a wail. “They have had rock slides before—that is why they called this gallery unsafe. The pressure of your weight as you passed—it was enough to make the roof fall!”

“Thank God, the rocks missed us both!” he exclaimed.

“Thank God, there is an open space between, so that we may talk!”

“But who are we to thank,” he groaned, “that we’re on opposite sides of this infernal rock-fall? Maybe, if I try, I can clear some of these stones away—”

“No, no, by the Timur’s beard, don’t!” she warned, in a voice shrill with alarm. “That might start another slide!”

“But how the deuce can we get out now?” he mourned. His head, reeling in that hot, devitalized air, was unable to do battle with the problem. Were they both to perish there in that foul tunnel?

“What does it matter if we die, so long as we die together?” he heard her say, as if in echo of his

thoughts.

Then, before he could attempt an answer, he was startled by a sound from the far distance. Thud, thud, thud! with a dull monotonous insistency, gradually growing louder, until it seemed as if he could hear the crashing and pounding of his approaching doom!

“What is it?” he gasped. “What can it be?”

But the answer was already on Ilwana’s lips.

“The troops! I should have known it! The troops have heard the rock-slide! They’re coming to investigate!”

Surely enough, vague shadows began to move from far down the gallery. Looking through a crevice between two fallen rocks—a crevice only a few inches across—he could see the wavering reflections. As yet the light-bearers were hidden around a turn in the corridor; but the green rays of their lanterns, flickering dimly through the tunnel walls, were more terrifying than a visible menace.

“Be of good heart, beloved. It is only the troops approaching,” Ilwana consoled him; but the tones of her voice betrayed that she was shuddering.

THUD, thud, thud, the noise grew louder and more ominous. Then suddenly, around a turn in the corridor, a tall figure swept, a dull green radium lantern burning in one hand, the keen steel of a spearpoint glittering above his right shoulder. Behind him, in close succession, others followed, although to Will’s eyes they were as a mere troop of shadows, of ghosts.

“Ah,” the leader exclaimed, his eyes falling upon Ilwana, who, in her disguise, he could not recognize. “What dog of a spy have we here? Come, you dirty wretch, out with you!”

With a wrench, the newcomer had jerked Ilwana forward by the arm. And Will, observing this act and hearing her murmur of protest, felt a savage desire to leap to her aid. Oh, could he only have burst through the rock wall! But was any lover ever in a more cruel position? Powerless to lift a finger to help her, he saw her lashed about with ropes; heard her cry out in shrill indignation; heard the mocking laughter of her captors; and heard one of the men exclaim:

“Away with her! We will bring her to our good master Murkambu, who makes short shrift of spies!”

“Oh, not to Murkambu!” the victim protested, terrified. “Do not take me to Murkambu!”

Her captors only laughed; while Will, clutching at the rocks in his rage, called out a challenge:

“Hurt one hair of her head, and, devil take you, I’ll—”

“Oh, so there’s another!” shouted one of the soldiers, aware for the first time of Will’s presence. “By the lamp of my eyes! Another spy! Let us take him too!”

With an eager thrust, the man started forward. But, even as he did so, the unexpected once more intervened. There came another roaring in Will’s ears, the rumble of walls collapsing, the crash and thunder of falling rocks; and Will, knocked to the earth by the force of the upheaval, was momentarily stunned.

Recovering himself with an effort, he realized that the fissure in the rocks had been sealed. Everything about him was dark and silent as death; and there was no answer when he beat his fists against the rocks, and called out, in choking, sobbing notes:

“Ilwana! Ilwana! Answer me, Ilwana! Answer! Ilwana, Ilwana, are you still alive?”

CHAPTER VIII

The Hour Strikes

SLOWLY, blindly, like a man in a bad dream, Will began groping his way down the black tunnel. He had no further hope of any response from Ilwana; the second rock-slide had evidently done its work all too well!

“God! Why didn’t it catch me, too!” Will muttered to himself, in his despondency; but, remembering his duty to the Timur, he knew that he had no choice but to go on and seek to extricate himself.

This task, however, seemed hopeless. He did not know for how many hours he wandered back and forth sagging with the heat, half delirious with thirst, his tongue hanging out like an exhausted dog’s, his head aching, his eyes useless in that impenetrable darkness. He knocked his head against jutting walls, stubbed his toes, bruised his shins and elbows; he tripped, and recovered himself; he sat for brief intervals on the rutted floor to rest, then arose and crept or stumbled on his way.

It was not long before he realized that he was lost. The tunnel branched in several places; he chose his course at random, and had to make blind guesses. Several times, when the gallery led sharply downward, he retraced his path; once he slipped down a ten-foot descent, and, torn and scratched, was unable to make his way back. And finally, near to fainting, he flung himself full length on the floor, his breath coming hard, his head swimming, his skin burning hot; while his fevered mind formed visions of how, perhaps for ages, his bones would lie here in this blank depth, unburied, undiscovered, until at last the cavern roof fell in above them.

But again he arose and struggled on, stumbling and creeping, more often on all fours than erect. It seemed that an epoch of torment went by before, long afterward, he was aware of a dim light shining somewhere ahead.

He approached it; it appeared far away, appeared to retreat as he advanced; he felt that he had not the strength to reach it. But gradually the light brightened; and there came a moment when, at a turn in the tunnel, he found himself approaching the entrance of an illuminated gallery, where a cool breath showed that he was returning to the air-conditioned regions.

It was there that, an hour or two later, a company of armed scouts found him as they made their regular rounds. He lay unconscious, apparently lifeless, and it was long before they could revive him. Even after his eyes opened and the power of speech came back to him, he looked about him doubtfully and with fear.

“Who are you? Murkambu’s men?” he mumbled, wondering if he had endured so much merely in order to fall into the power of his enemy.

But at the mention of Murkambu, the leader of the scouts spat out in disgust.

“No! by our honor! We are loyal troops of His Loftiness the Timur!”

“Thank God!” sighed Will, and sank back into unconsciousness.

MANY hours more had passed before he was in a condition to see the ruler. Then, rested and fed, and with his soiled and gashed clothes replaced by a clean, fresh robe, he was led back to the edifice of many-domed crystal where the Timur held court.

To his surprise, a great change had overcome the whole region. Enormous walls of rock had been thrown up, in some places completely hiding the bubble palaces. Black screens had been erected in front of the mushroom temples; a mesh work of deep trenches threaded the earth; heavy wire entanglements marked "Keep off!" lined the walks among the fountains and flowers. And everywhere were brusque, black-clad men carrying spears and long, gray, steel machines of about the size and shape of a baseball bat.

"What in blazes has come over the place?" Will wondered. But he was not to be long in finding out.

Once again he was led through a little oblong doorway into the crystalline palace; down a long arched corridor that glowed with translucent rose and gold; and into a great vaulted chamber where dozens of men in long flowing robes were squatted cross-legged on the floor.

In the center, also cross-legged, the Timur sat upon his platform of purple velvet. But it seemed to Will that he looked years older; his back, previously erect in spite of his years, now seemed stooped beneath an invisible weight; and his face appeared thinner and more lined.

Upon seeing Will, who reached down and touched the floor three times with his left hand in the prescribed ceremony of respect, the Timur motioned to the assembled company in a gesture of dismissal; and, after they were gone, turned to Will, and inquired, in a sad and weary voice:

"Well, Manu, what have you found?"

As briefly as possible, Will reported what he knew of Murkambu's preparations.

"He plans to strike the great blow immediately!" he ended breathlessly. "Less than forty-eight hours from when I left—and I do not know how much time has passed."

In such excitement did the Timur lean forward that Will thought he was about to fall off his pedestal.

"What's that?" he demanded. "By my robe, Manu! just what did you hear?"

Will mentioned the day and hour, according to the local way of reckoning time. And, at this announcement, the Timur's blue eyes seemed ready to pop out of his head. He gave a still more agitated start, twisted about on his purple platform, and exclaimed, in a long-drawn voice of despair:

"Why, that gives us only one hour more!"

PARALYZED by the blow, the ruler seemed unable to warm himself into action.

"I knew it would happen!" he muttered into his beard. "I knew it! Haven't I been taking defense measures? Haven't I been building electric barricades, to smite the enemy with the sting of death? And Ray Screens, to ward off the poison Infra-Red light beams? And Boomerang Nets, to catch and hurl back the enemy's projectiles? Haven't I ruined our beautiful land? What will be left of it all when the attack is over?"

"Come, you must rouse yourself—take action, Your Loftiness! At once!"

"Take action, Manu? But how? From what direction will the attack come? Against what should I defend myself? Murkambu will strike in the dark, with secret new weapons. I have not the forces to defend myself—no, in spite of all my preparations! I have not the forces, Manu! Not unless I make use of secret new weapons!"

"What secret new weapons have you, Your Loftiness?"

The Timur thought for a moment, and his face appeared graver than ever.

“Nothing that is not too terrible to use. No, nothing not too terrible to use, Manu. Locked up in my private vaults, there are—”

Interrupting him in mid-sentence, a uniformed man dashed in through the rear door. Dishevelled, panting, red-faced, he entered without formality; pressed forward, half reeling, to the Timur’s pedestal; and, without taking time to prostrate himself or salute, burst out, in a broken voice:

“Your Loftiness—Your Loftiness—”

“What is it, Eru?” demanded the ruler, his twitching fingers eloquent of his concern.

“Your Loftiness,” rushed on the newcomer, gasping. “Your Loftiness—tidings for you!”

“What tidings?”

“Murkambu’s men—his Crawl Troopers—they have stormed us on the Seventh Layer. They have broke—have broken through our first Column of Defense!”

All too clearly Will remembered the troops he had seen crawling and squirming in a great serpentine.

“They have wound their way in snake-like,” went on Eru, with a wail. “Crushed our advance guard with a rattlesnake twist! Many of our men are in flight, O Leader! There seems no way to beat the enemy back.”

The Timur groaned. In tones so low and rapid that Will could not follow the words, he snapped out a series of orders. Then, coming down from his pedestal and taking up a pronged staff, he started in stately dignity across the room.

“The hour is come,” he said, “when we must give our all for LeMur and be ready to die in order that right may live.”

CHAPTER IX

The Crawl Troopers Advance

OUT of a thousand tunnels, which appeared at sudden unexpected places in the earth, the black-and-white striped troops of the Science Party were pouring. They shot from the ground in little buzzing machines, which leapt forward like grasshoppers; they crawled down from the roof of the Great Cavern, and swung themselves to the floor on spider-like cables; they squirmed in their serpent columns around the buildings and over the rock-piles; they pointed their weapons, shaped like baseball bats; and let out showers of blue sparks, which immunized the electrical defenses. Barricades crumbled before them like paper; while thousands of citizens fled shouting and screaming, jostling one another as they dived into deep pits for safety; or falling head-long with mortal shrieks as they were pierced by the flame-red bolts launched by the invaders.

Meanwhile, in a small closed compartment five layers underground, the Timur sat with a small corps of his advisers. Through a combination radio and television machine, he had been following the invasion; and his eyes were moist as he watched the rapid advance of Murkambu’s followers.

“I knew we were not prepared,” he mourned, “but I never suspected the enemy could take us so by storm.”

“O Timur,” said Will, who stood at his side, “what of the secret weapons you said you had?”

The Timur sighed.

“Never did I suppose I would descend to using them. They are savage enough, Manu, to be worthy of the Upper Air!”

“Yet you are going to use them?”

“I myself have this day persuaded him,” declared General Massupu, a bulldog-faced figure who stood to the ruler’s right. “His Loftiness was very reluctant, but I have convinced him that the end justifies the means.”

“I fear that the end will be ruin!” mourned the Timur.

“The end will be victory!” dissented Massupu. “Wait, and see! In only a few minutes now, the new inventions will be in operation. We will witness the results through the Sound-Sight Relayer.”

With a confident gesture, the General pointed to a great chest-like case, from which scores of rubber tubes emerged, in masses like a Gorgon’s hair. This, Will knew, was the radio-television machine; by adjusting the appropriate tubes to eyes and ears, every person in the room might be a long-range spectator of the battle.

“Yes, the new inventions will save us!” Massupu went on, with smiling assurance. And, indeed, it soon began to look as if he spoke the truth! For Will, by means of the “Sound-Sight Relayer,” gazed upon a strangely altered battlefield.

FIRST he observed the bubble palaces, the mushroom temples, with the invading columns winding among them in their thick serpent-like masses. Then suddenly, out of the earth, iron snouts several feet across emerged, looking a little like the heads of gigantic metal drills. And from each of these machines, almost instantly, there uprose a gleaming muzzle, like a huge rapid-fire gun, which shot a long white streak, apparently of solid matter, to the accompaniment of a roaring which, in spite of the dimming effects of the machine, was almost too much for the listener’s ears. Each streak struck one of the columns of men, which melted away before it like ants before a hurricane; each, swerving to right and left, obliterated whole battalions.

Deadly tanks that bored up from within the earth!

But they did not stop with the destruction of the men. One bored its way like a series of sixteen-inch shells through the buildings, which collapsed one after one, to the accompaniment of a Titanic crashing and thundering. And in places, where a white streak struck the ground, the solid rock seemed to dissolve before it, while great steamy clouds arose and hid the wreckage.

Then, when by degrees the mists cleared away and the white streaks had vanished, Will could see only the broken steel bones of towers, the glitter of shattered glass, the jumbles of stone and steel where the exquisite courts and temples had stood. All were drenched as by a flood; great pools of water stood all about; and muddy streams flowed in all directions.

Will did not need to be told what had caused the devastation. It had all been done by the power of water! Hydraulic spouts, under such pressure as to release the liquid with a bullet’s speed, were as savage destroyers as solid projectiles. The principle was already familiar in the Upper Air, in hydraulic mining that tore down whole mountainsides—the Le-Murian weapons merely represented an extension of the same ideal

“By my beard,” mourned the Timur, as he staggered away from the Sound-Sight Relayer, “at the rate we’re tearing things up, we won’t be much better off if we win than if we lose!”

“Quite the contrary, Your Loftiness!” enthused General Massupu. “Why, it gives me a sense of artistic satisfaction, the way we wiped the enemy out. But wait! We haven’t finished yet! The other inventions are still more wonderful!”

TURNING back to the Sight-Sound Relayer, Will saw something that looked like a gigantic flaming eagle launched into air from a hidden tube. It floated through space, midway to the roof of the Great Cavern, and gave off crimson sparks as it advanced; while following it by adjusting the instrument as it moved toward Murkambu’s domains, Will saw how it swooped with orange-red drooping talons upon a great domed building. For an instant it hovered above the roof, as if held back by some conscious reluctance; then fell—and, in a sudden scarlet puff, the building was gone.

“Well, what do you think of our eagle torpedo?” General Massupu demanded. “Ought to cost the enemy a good deal before we’re done, don’t you think?”

But Will, as he observed the debris of the once-proud edifice, felt a regret that he could not wholly account for, as at the death of something rare and priceless. Was it that the thought of Ilwana was in his mind? That he knew that she, if alive, would be in just such a place as the eagle torpedo had destroyed? But no! She had been crushed in the rock-slide! It could make no difference to her what bombs were launched or what buildings wrecked!

“The principle of the torpedo is really very simple,” he heard Massupu explaining, jubilantly. “Buoyed up in an envelope of hydrogen, it can travel forty or fifty miles through the air with its cargo of deadly explosives. Then, when it strikes, the hydrogen, igniting, will make the explosion all the more destructive. But look at *this* weapon!”

Once more Will’s eyes and ears were fastened on the Sight-Sound Relayer, and noted a scene that was spectacular if not beautiful. Through the air, high up toward the roof of the Great Cavern, long colored filaments were moving. Ribbon-like and wavy, they extended in lines of orange and vermilion, indigo and lemon, emerald, sapphire and ruby, which bent and twisted like colossal sky-serpents and rapidly moved westward toward Murkambu’s headquarters.

At first they seemed so much like the parts of some harmless and fantastic exhibition that it was hard to believe them the agents of death. But Will, observing them as they came to earth with swift and sinuous windings after traveling for miles, saw how every man and woman within many yards fell as if struck by a bullet, quivered for a moment, and then lay still.

“These are the Sky Serpents,” stated General Massupu. “They are composed of poison gasses, which loop and squirm so horribly that once we have launched them they are out of control, and neither we or the enemy can tell where they are to descend.”

“You believe these inventions can win the war?” asked Will.

General Massupu nodded.

“Murkambu will have no chance. Within a few weeks the Science Party will be defeated by science.”

THE events of the next several days did, indeed, seem to bear out this prediction. With the introduction of the secret weapons, a sharp turn in the tide of battle was noted. Will, listening and watching beside the Timur and his advisers, heard the jubilation as the invasion was thrown back mile

after mile; as Murkambu's crawl-troopers were scattered or chased into the depths of the earth; as all the Science warriors were cleared out of the districts they had overrun; and the Timur's forces prepared to take the offensive in the territory still under rebel control.

"This will be the end of Murkambu!" predicted General Massupu, as he exultantly followed the various engagements through the Sight-Sound Relayer.

Will, convinced of the truth of this forecast, now began to think of returning to the Upper Air. A deep, unceasing melancholy had possessed him ever since the loss of Ilwana; he knew that he could never find peace without her here in Le-Mur. On the other hand, how could he return to his own land until he knew beyond any question what had happened to her? Even though he had ceased to hope, he must have positive information as to her fate! And for that he must wait until the war was over and he could again enter her father's territory.

But meanwhile strange and disastrous events were to intervene.

One day, upon descending to the Timur's underground retreat, Will found the ruler looking particularly depressed. Little blue hollows had formed beneath his eyes; his long, sagacious face drooped, and his cheeks were crisscrossed with downturned grooves. He hardly acknowledged Will's salute; but, gazing straight ahead with a sad, fixed stare, remarked:

"It is just as I thought, Manu. The new weapons are of no use after all."

"Of no use, O Timur? But have they not driven the enemy back?"

"Yes, for a while, Manu. But there is an old saying of our people: 'The tricks taught to the right hand can be learned by the left.' Look through the Sound-Sight Relayer—and you will see!"

Will did as directed; and saw the black-and-white striped columns of Murkambu advancing in a long serpentine across a plain littered with heaped and broken masonry. Out of great spouts, aiding their advance, poured white devastating streams of molten metal; above them, gigantic torpedoes floated through the air toward the enemy; while flashing streaks of lightning reached out in long banners.

"Good God!" Will exclaimed. "They've improved on our inventions!"

"Exactly!" groaned the Timur. "Which means we're as badly off as ever. They've already taken back most of the land we recaptured from them. What's more, we don't seem able to stop their advance. They also have a wholly new weapon—and it's more terrible than any of ours."

WILL, peering and listening through the instrument, was aware of a prodigious apparition just rising above a little ridge of ground. Shaped like a tiger, with great black and tawny stripes, it seemed larger than an elephant as it came springing forward in a series of stupendous bounds. From its wide-open red mouth, a purple vapor fumed; its claws, slashing at the ground whenever they touched it, left gashes many feet wide. Its eyes were yellow blazes so bright that Will could hardly bear to look; and from its throat there issued a bellowing as of an infuriated bull.

Appalled, and not quite sure whether it were an actual beast, Will watched the monster approach. Then all at once, with such force that it caused the very instrument to tremble, the giant flew apart—scattered into hundreds of fragments, each of which burst with loud detonations and showers of crimson sparks. It was several minutes before the upheaval had subsided; and, when all was quiet again, the earth over hundreds of acres was turned up as by a titanic plow.

"Great heavens!" exclaimed the watcher. "That is worse than any of our weapons."

“You don’t know the most terrible part of it, either,” the Timur announced, with a sigh. “The gases released by the explosions have a peculiar effect. Every one who inhales them suffers a peculiar lassitude, which may wear off in a few days, but leaves the victim without will power for a time. Or, rather, I should say the will is paralyzed, through some strange action of the gas upon the nervous system. Thus thousands of our troops, from the Generals down, have been left without the desire to fight, and have been taken prisoners without resistance.”

“But can’t we imitate this invention?”

“By the time our chemists would be able to analyze and copy it,” groaned the Timur, “there will be nothing left of us! No, I’m afraid, Manu, we’re at the end of our resources.”

Will reflected for a moment. And, as he did so, an idea shot into his head—an idea so striking, and yet so simple, that he wondered why it had never occurred to him before.

“O Timur,” he said, turning to the sovereign with a confident smile, “I believe I have a way of throwing back Murkambu and his hordes.”

CHAPTER X

Blue Nitrolene

SOLEMNLY, questioningly the Timur sat staring at Will. His blue eyes were grave with thought; his brows were wrinkled; doubt and perplexity were written in his manner.

“That is a wonderful invention, O Manu, if it is all that you claim. What do you call it?”

“Blue Nitrolene, O Timur. I have experimented upon it for years, and believe it the most deadly weapon ever invented, though the government of my own country would not buy it from me.”

“I can well understand that, Manu. If it is all that you say, it is too terrible to be entrusted in human hands. For grown men are but infants when one gives them the tools to destroy. What did you say the principle of this Blue Nitrolene is?”

Will explained how the chemical, a compound of nitrogen, carbon, sulphur and phosphorus, acted as an atomic catalyzer, breaking up the heavier and more complex elements to form the simpler, and consequently causing solid matter to disappear amid a stupendous release of energy.

“Have you the formula with you?” questioned the Timur.

“No, but have I not worked at it for years, making the substance time after time, so that I know every detail of the process by heart. I know your laboratories, Loftiness, are well equipped. I will have no trouble in showing your chemists how to make Blue Nitrolene. It shall not take long—within twenty-four hours, I promise you, you shall have a supply!”

“And what is to prevent the enemy from copying it, Manu? So that we all will be worse off in the end?”

“Before the enemy can study it, they will be defeated, O Timur.”

“Then has this invention ever been tried in warfare?”

“Never, Your Loftiness. Yet I know what it will accomplish.”

“And even if we win, Manu, this weapon will remain in Le-Mur, waiting to be seized by some new

rebel leader, who will use it to blow the country to bits. No, Manu! A deadly invention may be worse than any human enemy.”

Argue as he would, Will could not convince the Timur. Precisely because the weapon promised to be so effective, the ruler refused to employ it!

And, indeed, except for an unforeseen event, it probably never would have been employed.

A FEW hours later, a conference of the Timur’s advisers had gathered in his little underground retreat. General Massupu had just finished a long address, in which he declared that, at the rate Murkambu was advancing, the defending forces could not hold out for another forty-eight hours.

No sooner had he sat down than a tremor, as of an earthquake, was felt. Almost instantly, it was followed by a severer tremor, so violent that all the occupants of the room were flung about like dice in a box. And while they cried out in terror and a third tremor rocked the room, an enormous bulge appeared in the ceiling, and a great pointed mass of metal protruded.

It was a minute before the men, stunned and bruised, were able to recover themselves sufficiently to examine this object.

“By my head! A torpedo!” exclaimed General Massupu, as he staggered up to the metal. “Thank the blessed fates, it was a dud! Otherwise, none of us would be here to tell the story!”

“How could it be a torpedo?” questioned Will. “I thought we were a hundred feet below the Great Cavern.”

“Yes, but evidently,” Massupu sighed, “Murkambu has torpedoes which will burrow a hundred feet through earth and rock.”

A long pregnant silence greeted this remark.

“That means that no matter where we go,” at length declared the Timur, “we will not be safe from attack.”

“It means the end!” groaned Massupu.

“That is, O Timur,” suggested Will, “unless we are willing to try Blue Nitrolene.”

The Timur smoothed out his ruffled robe, and stroked his long beard thoughtfully.

“It is either surrender—or the new weapon!” asserted Minister of Defense Hamur.

“There is no time to lose, either,” put in Massupu. “Shall it be said that we gave in when even the tiniest chance for victory remained?”

“Victory? Victory?” flung back the ruler, as his tall tottering form paced the floor in agitation. “What victory can there be now? No matter how the war ends, we are all defeated! Our lives are blasted, our country torn up! Our only choice is the least among many evils!”

“The least among many evils is Blue Nitrolene, O Timur!”

But the sovereign still hesitated; and might have continued to hesitate, had a fresh upheaval not shaken the room for more than a minute with earthquake throes. This time no protruding mass of metal was seen; but all faces were pale, all eyes distended with alarm.

“You see, Your Loftiness,” said General Massupu, “there is no tunnel deep enough to protect us.”

“True,” admitted the Timur, sadly. And then reluctantly, bitterly, in the manner of one who passes a death sentence. “Perhaps, as you may say, Manu, Blue Nitrolene is the least among many evils. Largun-see, our Minister of Chemistry, will conduct you to our laboratories, whose entire facilities are to be placed at your disposal. It is my order!”

But as Will arose and started out in company with Largun-see, the Timur’s gloomy mutterings followed him.

“Heaven help us now! Heaven forgive me for this choice!”

NEVER had Will seen any laboratory so excellently equipped as the one to which Largun-see led him. Covering several acres of a gallery below the Great Cavern, it was provided with every instrument that Will had ever seen or imagined, and scores that he had neither seen nor imagined. There was every variety of test-tube and retort; electrical devices for converting great quantities of water instantly into steam, and for turning steam to ice; inter-atomic machines, shaped like seige-guns, for dissociating the elements; engines, looking like cabinet radios, which would make qualitative analyses of most substances as rapidly as an adding machine would total a column of figures; as well as immense quantities of most of the less unstable elements and more common compounds.

Best of all!—there were dozens of skilled assistants ready to serve Will’s every nod and call—a striking contrast to the one-man home laboratory where he had previously worked and made all his discoveries!

Thanks to these facilities, it was only a few hours before he was in possession of some of the innocent-looking sea-blue compound that was to decide the fate of Le-Mur.

CHAPTER XI

The Destroyer Breaks Loose

WILL has always maintained that he never made more than a few grams of Blue Nitrolene during all this time in Le-Mur. He has always claimed that this amount, although capable of causing prodigious damage, would not of itself have sufficed to produce the unparalleled catastrophe that brought his days in the underground world to their dread climax. Some unidentified foreign substance, in quantities almost too slight for detection, must have been mixed with the Blue Nitrolene in the course of its manufacture, and produced a change in some of its essential characteristics, and a heightening of its potency.

Such, at least, is Will’s explanation. For the fact remains that Blue Nitrolene, terrible as it was in the experiment that I witnessed in Will’s laboratory, proved inconceivably more frightful among the caverns of Le-Mur.

Only a few hours after the first mild-looking particles had been produced in the laboratory, the forces of Murkambu were to be confronted with a new weapon—and one that, for sheer horror and destructiveness, put to shame such puny devices as the Eagle Torpedoes and the Sky Serpents.

It was a company of Crawl Troopers who first encountered the Blue Nitrolene as they wound, bellies to earth, through one of the wide branching galleries beneath the Great Cavern. Their advance had been strangely unimpeded; and, feeling that the Timur’s resistance was about at an end, they had gone forward for miles, and were ready to sweep into the main cavern itself and take possession of some of the outposts of the Timur’s capitol. Then suddenly, in front of them, through a long narrow shaft in the earth, a projectile was dropped.

It was no larger than an orange, and consisted of a glass sphere, which shattered on striking and released several tiny pale blue particles. But no sooner had the foremost of the Crawl Troopers caught a glimpse of the blue specks than a change came over the entire scene.

Almost instantly, there was a hissing as of a thousand steam exhausts in simultaneous action. Spouts of smoke, and clouds of sulphurous vapor shot toward the cavern roof; a bubbling arose from the floor, which began to glare and seethe, with an effervescence as of a powerful acid devouring a metal; and, extending from small foci, the bubbling patches spread in concentric circles, like slowly widening ripples on a pond. . . until, after a minute or two, the entire floor was a molten, fuming, blazing mass.*

** Obviously the effect here is of a progressive atomic disintegration, although not on an absolute scale, so that matter is annihilated completely, and changed into energy. Rather, there is a disruption of normal material forms into other normal material forms, with a partial release of energy in the process. The result of such releases of energy might be compared to the burns (on human flesh) caused by radium emanations. A great amount of damage is done to flesh in this manner, by contagion, and resultant irritation not in itself the action of the original agency.—Ed.*

AT the same time, a torrid heat shot out from the center of infection. The skins of the men were blistered, their eyebrows were singed, the clothes of some of the foremost took fire. Panic arose among them; with cries as of trapped animals, they sprang to their feet; and, thrusting, shoving, squirming, fighting with fists and elbows, they battled their way back toward safety. But many of them, overcome, lay writhing in the path of the destroyer, whose hissing, seething waves spread out to consume them.

Before the day was over, a score of companies of Murkambu's troops had met the same fate. Every advance guard of the rebels had been routed; and several of the main contingents had been driven back before the glowing, steaming fury that was everywhere dissolving the solid rock and earth.

Within less than three days, raids had been made into Murkambu's territory, and bombs containing small quantities of the blue destroyer had been dropped by "do-and-die" squads of loyal soldiers—one or two of whom, unexpectedly, survived and returned to tell of the consternation they had caused, the disruption of normal life, the panic flight of the populace, who fled in stampeding crowds, while the sizzling foe ate through the pavements of cities and the walls of buildings with an insatiable, irresistible, unceasing rapacity.

The Sight-Sound Relayer, meantime, had confirmed the stories, and had shown streets gashed with enormous craters, which slowly widened, while black fumes arose from the flaming depths; solid hillsides which melted, and ran in rivers that gradually dissolved in gas; and great masses of machinery, with steel rods, wheels and boilers, which disappeared like kindling wood in a conflagration.

It seems strange, when one recalls the subsequent cataclysm, that the general danger was not at first realized. It was thought—and Will confesses that he shared in the general delusion—that only Murkambu's territory was menaced. Hence there was rejoicing among the Timur's followers.

"A few days more, and we will have crushed Murkambu's resistance!" they said. "A few days more, and we will have won the war!"

Time was to prove their predictions correct—so far as they went. But it was also to prove that they did not go far enough.

ONE day the Timur was sitting in his underground retreat, amid a group of his advisers. Although it had been impossible for him to return to his palace of many-domed crystal, which had been wrecked by rebel raiders, he was in a happier mood than for many weeks. He was smiling once more with his old patriarchal benignity; and the luster had come back into his eyes, which had been wont to look dull and faded of late.

“Yes, Your Loftiness,” General Massupu was informing him, “there are only a few more active contingents of Murkambu’s troops in the field—and it will take us but another day or two to subdue them.”

“Thanks be to the Manu!” exclaimed the ruler, fervently, with a nod in Will’s direction. “We will have to decorate him with the Purple Plume of the Loyal Defenders, the highest honor we can grant.”

“But the ruin caused by this war—it will take us many years to repair it!” sighed Minister of Construction Zampum. “Our cities are mere debris—”

He was interrupted by a peculiar whizzing and buzzing from a horn-shaped brass instrument to his right. And he pressed a little button at one end, and instantly the room was filled with a booming voice. For the machine, which was a development of the Sight-Sound Relayer, performed the same functions as our telephone, except that one did not have to listen through a tube but could hear at a distance of many feet.

“The Timur! His Loftiness the Timur! I would speak with the Timur!” shouted the voice.

“Who is it?” called back Minister Zampum.

“It is I, Minister of Defense Hamur! Would you have my password?”

Several words, whose meaning Will could not recognize, were spoken; then the Timur raised his voice:

“What is it, Zampum? It is I, the Timur! Where are you? What do you want?”

“Important tidings, Your Loftiness! Important tidings! I am now at the front! I have received a message from Murkambu!”

The Timur’s voice trembled just a little as he inquired:

“And what is the message, Zampum?”

“He wishes to arrange a conference, Your Loftiness. To sue for peace.”

THE assembled men stared at one another with significant smiles; several thankful sighs were heard.

“Peace is what we all want,” replied the Timur. “But it must be on our own terms.”

There was a brief pause before the voice of the invisible resumed,

“No, Your Loftiness, it must be on his terms.”

Oaths and mutterings were heard throughout the room.

“What is that, Zampum?” demanded the ruler, in a voice of resentment. “Have you gone off to the enemy’s side? If Murkambu sues for peace, why must we grant it on his terms?”

Another weighted pause ensued; and then the reply was heard, distinct and emphatic:

“Because, O Timur, there is a greater enemy than Murkambu at the doors. Because we must fight at his side to throw down a foe that threatens us all.”

“But there is no foe beside Murkambu!”

“Indeed there is, O Timur! Murkambu sues for peace not for fear of our warriors, but for fear of Blue

Nitrolene. It spreads everywhere like a plague. It eats away buildings, and undermines galleries, moving in ever wider circles. It menaces both sides alike. Ask Minister of Construction Zampum. Yes, ask him—and after that I will speak with you again.”

Gravely the Timur turned toward his Minister of Construction.

“What is this, Zampum, that you have been keeping from me?”

Zampum’s face turned a flaming red.

“There was no need to alarm you, O Timur, for we thought a remedy would be found. But it is truly as Hamur has said. Blue Nitrolene keeps spreading like a fire, and we do not know how to quench it. We fear it more than we do the enemy.”

A black scowl had lined the Timur’s face. Angrily he stalked toward Zampum.

“It is an evil thing,” he said, “that I have not been told. Come! I must see for myself! By my beard! If you keep any information from me now—”

With a hasty twist of his fingers, Zampum was adjusting the dials of the Sight-Sound relay. An instant later, the face of the Timur, as he looked and listened through the instrument, took on an expression of amazement, consternation, horror. For at least five minutes he remained at the machine, twitching slightly; then, in a snapping, decisive manner, he turned toward the horn-shaped brass contrivance.

“Hamur? Still there?” he demanded.

“Yes, Your Loftiness!”

“Then get into touch with Murkambu at once! Tell him that his terms are accepted!”

With a sigh, the Timur sank back; and, panting heavily, had to be supported by two of his followers.

WILL meantime had hastily adjusted the Sight-Sound Relayer to his eyes and ears, and had caught glimpses of smoking craters, wide as those of volcanoes, into which great buildings were collapsing, while from their, flaming depths poured spouts of steam and immense twisting black wreaths of smoke. He saw the streets of a city crisscrossed with spreading fissures, from which thick yellow fumes were rising; and watched the submergence of a whole wide avenue, covered with trees and fountains, which sank with an ear-splitting roar into the blind depths, leaving only dust-clouds and ashes.

“There is indeed a greater enemy than Murkambu,” sighed the Timur, still breathing heavily. “We can have no further thought of fighting him now.”

Then, turning toward Will with a challenging blaze in his eyes, he demanded,

“You are the one to help us, Manu! You have introduced Blue Nitrolene! Now you must tell us the antidote!”

Ringed about by a circle of hostile faces, Will felt like a stag cornered by hounds. The Ministers, so tolerant and friendly only a few days before, now glared at him with bitter, angry eyes. And Will’s heart sank, for he knew that he had no antidote for Blue Nitrolene; that never, in his experiments on earth, had it required an antidote, since it had burned itself out in time. So how would it be possible for him now, without long experimentation, to determine just what had gone wrong and how it could be remedied?

“Your Loftiness,” he replied, “if you will give me but a few days—”

“A few days?” flung back the Timur, savagely. “In a few days, it may be too late!”

“I am sorry, Your Loftiness, but I know of no remedy—”

“Huh! I see it all now!” interrupted General Massupu, pointing a threatening finger at Will. “It is a plot! He was in the employ of Murkambu! It is a scheme to throw us down!”

Concurring murmurs and growls sounded from half a dozen throats.

“It’s as clear as light—Fifth Tower penetration!” thundered Minister Zampum. “The miserable spy!”

SEVERAL of the ministers drew closer to Will, bristling, with steely flashing eyes, like wolves preparing to spring.

“Now, now, hold back there!” counselled the Timur, facing his followers sternly. “If the Manu was Murkambu’s spy, how is it that his invention threatens our enemy as much as it does us?”

A brief silence greeted this question. But General Massupu was quick to reach the solution,

“Then he is a spy sent from the Upper Air to overthrow all Le-Mur! That is it! He is a spy from the Upper Air!”

Even the Timur gave a start at this accusation; and Will could see the growing enmity in the eyes of every one present.

“Why should I be a spy from the Upper Air?” he attempted to protest... when he was cut short by furious cries.

“Down with him! Throw him out! Take him away! To the Obliteration Rooms!”

It was with difficulty that the Timur quieted the disturbance. The ministers, forgetting their self-control, seemed bent upon finding a scapegoat. Their shaking fists, their contorted features, their malevolently shining eyes boded no good for Will as they stormed about him threateningly, while he glared at them in erect, defiant dignity.

“Come! Give the Manu a chance!” ordered the Timur; although his cool glittering glance showed that he too was by no means as friendly as of old. “We will let him seek an antidote for Blue Nitrolene. Surely, if he wishes, he can unmake what he has made. So I will once more open our laboratories to him.”

“Largun-see,” he went on, turning to his Minister of Chemistry, “you will conduct the Manu back to the Central Laboratory!”

And then to Will, as he started away in the company of Largun-See:

“Make haste, Manu! Remember, the safety of us all may depend upon it!”

From the grim, warning glances cast him by several of the ministers, Will knew that, regardless of the safety of Le-Mur as a whole, his own safety did assuredly depend upon the speed he made.

CHAPTER XII

To the Black Tower

WILL’S eyes, as he bent over the blue vials on the laboratory table, were red and bloodshot. His

lean form twisted and untwisted like a reed in the wind; his fingers twitched; low mutterings came from between his clenched teeth.

“God,” he exclaimed, throwing down a test-tube so violently that it shattered, and spilt its sputtering contents over the green porcelain basin, “it’s all no use! No use under heaven!”

In the reeling condition of his head, he hardly knew how long he had been laboring over the problem. Certainly, for more than two days, during which he had not had three hours of sleep. He was feeling crushed, smothered, like one who does battle with a sand-storm; he should have had months or even years to wrestle with the problem!

Sagging down upon a three-legged stool, he sat with his face buried in his hands; while from just beyond the barred doors a shout arose, followed by the angry mumbling of many voices, which rose and fell, and rose and fell, menacing, insistent, savage. The doors rocked and shook as threatening hands seized them from without, until the whole room seemed to tremble.

“There’s no quieting them, Manu,” said Largun-see, the Minister of Chemistry, as he came up to Will and tapped him gently on the shoulders. “I never would have believed it possible—our civilized Le-murians becoming so bloodthirsty!”

The voices from without had become louder and more articulate; at every entrance to the laboratory, a mob was clamoring.

“Give us the Manu! Down with the Manu, the Manu! Give us the spy, the traitor! Tear him to bits... The spy!... The Fifth Towerist! He has ruined our land!”

“Listen, Manu,” counselled Largun-see, “better get out while there’s still time. Over there to the left, just beyond the Radium Room, there is a trap-door in the floor—”

“Down with the Manu! Down with him! The traitor! The spy! The Fifth Towerist! Tear him to shreds!” clamored the voices, in an increasing din.

Will looked up apprehensively, but shook his head. “No, Largun-see, I’m not going to run—not while there’s a ghost of a chance—”

“But the mob, Manu—it’s made up of wild beasts. You don’t know them. They’re hungry for your blood. They blame everything on you—”

The doors were shaking until it seemed as if they could not hold out much longer.

“Manu—Manu—down with him! Grab him, catch him, crush him to bits!” thundered the rabble, while the blows of fists and heavy implements smashed against the barricades.

AT the same time, an even more frightening phenomenon broke out. On the roof just above Will, a sudden bright patch had appeared, to the accompaniment of an ominous sizzling and hissing. Widening from a narrow focus, it spread out in a slowly expanding circle, radiating a furnace heat and giving forth clouds of smoke and steam through a freshly made opening in the roof. Will caught a glimpse of the Great Cavern, although, as he knew, this had been separated from the laboratory by more than ten feet of solid rock!

At his first glimpse of the glaring patch, Largun-see had given a gasp and a sigh. “By my robe! it’s the end!” And, without another word, he rushed toward the trapdoor beyond the Radium Room.

Will, as he stared at the devouring fury in a sort of fascinated daze, realized that it was indeed the end. Within a few hours, Blue Nitrolene would have destroyed the laboratory!

Knowing that he had lost the battle; and knowing, also, that this meant the doom of Le-Mur, Will at first had scarcely the ambition to save himself. Why not go down amid the ruins of the world which he had unwittingly destroyed? At the doors of the laboratory, he could still hear those wild-beast cries, "Death to the Manu! Don't let the spy out! Grab the traitor! Pound him to bits!" But he scarcely cared if the mob broke in and seized him.

Then all at once—and he could not say just how this happened—it was as if a cry had come to him from a long distance. The face of Ilwanna framed itself before him, Ilwanna violet-eyed and auburn-haired as he had known her, but with her lovely features contorted with a look of terror and distracted pleading.

And suddenly, in some strong but irrational way, the conviction fastened itself upon him that she might not be dead after all. The thought came to him that she might not only be alive, but in need of him; the idea that, if there were so much as one chance in ten thousand that she survived, it was a chance which he must not throw aside.

No! though the world were tumbling about his ears, he must seek her out, must learn the secret of her fate—and if, as he had long assumed, she were beyond his power to find, then he would be no worse off than now.

Just the faintest wisp of a new hope animated him as he hastened along the broiling laboratory, from whose ceiling pebbles and great rocks were beginning to fall. He passed the Radium Room; found the trapdoor, which Largun-see, in his haste, had left open; darted down the winding stairs; and closed the door behind him just as the mob, with a triumphant push, burst in at the further end of the room, with shouts of, "Catch the Manu! Beat him down! Pummel him! Kill him!"

BY a circuitous route, through small winding side-tunnels, he made his way to the surface of the Great Cavern, where he paused in horror and consternation. What a change had come over the huge concrete columns which, shaped like inverted funnels, supported the roof! Bent as by an earthquake, some of them were horribly warped and twisted; others leaned like the famous tower at Pisa; one, with the hissing, seething furies eating away at it, had been severed at the base. And, in the roof, immense bulges had appeared, which seemed to the observer to deepen even as he watched. The marvel was that the roof had not already fallen!

Picking his way across the deep trenches and over heaps of refuse where here and there he could make out a still, man-sized form, Will hastened toward the quarters assigned him some time before by the Timur.

All was in confusion about him. Here and there some stray child ran crying, like a lost dog, looking for its parents; here and there some group of crazed refugees wandered, wailing and tearing at their hair. Old men tottered along on canes, their backs weighted down by burdens, looking for escape they knew not where; mothers trundled along with shrieking children, or fell fainting by the way, to rise and totter onward again; sturdy young men tried in vain to help their women as they struggled from the burning ruins of their homes, staggering on in search of a refuge, past other fugitives who staggered on in the opposite direction.

Blue Nitrolene was, apparently, doing its work thoroughly! To the west there was a continual line of flame; while the dull booming of explosions came time after time to Will's ears, and now and then the earth beneath him shuddered.

In their terror, most of the refugees hardly took any notice of Will; although one or two paused to point with accusing fingers, or even to spit or curse. And there was one—a brawny, baleful-eyed

man—who picked up rocks and hurled them in a shower which Will barely managed to escape.

“Death to the devil!” he cried. A mob arose at his heels and ran after Will; and he might not have been able to save himself had it not been for a timely fissure which opened up between them in the earth, with clouds of black vapor where Blue Nitrolene was spreading from an underground corridor.

Meanwhile the din had grown to ear-splitting proportions. A continuous dull booming, as of distant thunder, was varied by occasional roars and crashings as buildings sagged and tottered; by an incessant rumbling and jarring as great buildings collapsed; and by the shrill hissing and screeching of steam, as geysers broke out from the ground at the most unexpected points.

At the same time, a sweaty, humid heat possessed all things. Foul odors, as of decay, mingled with the deadly stench of escaping chemicals, whose noisome gasses irritated the nostrils and eyes; cinders swirled everywhere on a hot wind, and the smoke-clouds blackened everything.

It was, indeed, the latter fact that enabled Will to make good his escape, for his hands and face became covered with a sooty smear, which served to disguise him, and permitted him to mingle inconspicuously with the refugees, all of whom were likewise be-smudged.

HAVING with difficulty reached his rooms, Will found one of the flashlights he had taken with him from the Upper Air; equipped himself with some compressed food, and water, and set out toward Murkambu’s mansion. In a straight line, on the surface roads, the distance was not more than a few miles, but it seemed to Will that he struggled for hours through that seething, horror-stricken world. Once he almost slipped and lost his life in a deep crevice in the earth; a little later, he was threatened by a madman, who ran about in wild circles, swinging a club and howling menace at every passer-by; again, he had to go around a vast area in which a pit as deep as the Grand Canyon had opened, vomiting forth continual waves of yellow sulphurous vapors. At times he staggered, and felt ready to fall; at times his bloodshot eyes could scarcely make out the path ahead...

But always the vision of Ilwana kept flashing before him, with her appealing, urgent eyes; and he knew that he must not give up until he had had word of her.

How much later it was he could not say, but at last he stood before Murkambu’s palace. The pale green and blue fountains had ceased to flow from their tinted bases. The pansies, which had grown as large as saucers, were trampled and broken; the ground was strewn with ash; ash covered the walls of the bubble mansion, which, once glowing with a luminous pearly light, was now dull and lifeless of hue.

In the alabaster court, where Will had first seen Ilwana by means of the Pellucid Depth Ray, a fountain of smoke and fire had sprung up; the busts of the venerable men and Venus-like women had fallen from their pedestals; the walls of the buildings, with their beautiful painted inscriptions, were dented and crumbling.

With a sigh, Will passed on to the main entrance of the palace. The door stood open; but all was dark and silent inside. The furniture was strewn about in confusion, bearing every sign of a hasty departure; but no servant walked those unlighted aisles, no guard stood at attention, no spear gleamed, no voice sounded. Will felt as if he had entered a tomb—all the more so when the thought of his beloved came to him, and he murmured, beneath his breath, “Ilwana, where are you? Where are you?”

For many minutes he wandered through the courts and salons, his lungs choked with the vapors that were pouring in in ever-thickening streams. Was he not engaged on a mad quest? In his heart, he believed so—yet in his heart he knew he could not quit, not while the burning image of Ilwana remained with him, her violet eyes beseeching, “Make haste, beloved, make haste!”

AT last, between two ash-scarred colonnades where blue hydrangeas had bloomed, he met an old, bent man who wandered witiessly to and fro and wore the drab yellow uniform of the servant class.

“The Upper Air devils,” he kept muttering to himself, in an incoherent, aimless manner, “the Upper Air devils have destroyed us!” and then, glancing at Will with eyes that spoke no recognition, “Is it not so, friend, the Upper Air devils have destroyed us!”

“Yes, the Upper Air devils!” agreed Will, to humor him.

The old man spat out in disgust, and was repeating his statement as if it were something new, when Will questioned him,

“Tell me, old father, do you know where Murkambu is?”

“Murkambu? Murkambu?” repeated the man, as if striving to grasp at an idea that eluded him. “He is gone, gone—they are all gone, gone! Run away from the Upper Air devils!”

“And Murkambu’s daughter, Ilwana? Do you know where she is?”

Will’s voice trembled as he put the question, but the old man merely went rambling on.

“The Upper Air devils—they have destroyed us, destroyed us!”

In his impatience, Will seized the old man, and shook the frail frame.

“Murkambu’s daughter—Murkambu’s daughter!” he repeated. “Ilwanna—Murkambu’s daughter—do you know where Ilwana is?”

“Ilwanna? Ilwana?” echoed the dotard, in a wailing, wandering voice. “Ilwanna? Ilwana? The Upper Air devils have destroyed us—”

But Will shook his victim more energetically than ever, and at last a faint gleam came into the faded eyes.

“Ilwanna? Ilwana? Was she not the fair one, the lovely elf—he whom the Leader locked in the Black Tower?”

“The Black Tower? Black Tower?” gasped Will. But by no amount of violence or urging could he extract any further information. “The Upper Air devils,” the man went on raving, “Upper Air devils have destroyed us—destroyed us!”

Yet even the fragment of information—incomplete and unsupported as it was—had come as a breath-taking revelation. For was it not possible that Ilwana was alive after all?—alive although a prisoner in the Black Tower?

CHAPTER XIII

Ordeal by Fire

THE Black Tower was well deserving of its name. Surrounded by a deep moat and high coal-black walls, it was draped in perpetual mourning as it stood on a low ridge of earth some distance back of Murkambu’s home. A tall stone edifice, with only a few narrow light-slits in place of windows, it was known as a place where political offenders languished, sometimes for years, without a trial and without prospect of release.

But if ordinarily repulsive, it was doubly so now. The roof of the cavern was caving in above it in a hundred-foot bulge, shaped like a half orange. The ground about it was plowed up as by a gigantic dredge, and a crater that erupted jets of flaming liquid was widening in front of it, with connecting fissures that gave promise of devouring the entire edifice at almost any moment. And the heat, like that of a bake oven, blew over Will in searing breaths as he approached, and made him doubt if he would be able to reach it alive.

“God in heaven,” he thought, “if there’s anybody in there now, most likely he’s cooked to a cinder!”

His lips were parched and cracking; his throat was dry; his limbs were burning in a fever-heat, but still he dragged his way on, around the crater with its spouts of blazing liquid, and toward the open main entrance of the Tower, from which the guards had evidently long departed.

As he passed through the gateway, he thought he could hear faint groans from somewhere within; and feeble, broken cries. He paused for a moment; snatched the keeper’s keys from a rack on a leaning wall; and started inside. As he did so, the floor shook with a lurch as of a speeding train rounding a curve; and Will was thrown from his feet. Recovering himself, he saw that a crack inches wide had opened in the ceiling; while the floor was still trembling.

Guided only by his flashlight, he started along the dark aisle, which wound sharply, so narrow as barely to permit his passage. On either side were small iron doors, to some of which he applied his keys. But the first of them to open showed an empty room; the second let out a cloud of nauseous vapors, from which he had to flee precipitately; and the third revealed a lean, silent, grimly unresponsive form.

“Too late! Am I too late?” he wondered, as his keys slid into the lock of the fourth door. An instant later, an emaciated figure with streaming white hair came tottering toward him.

“Forgotten! All, all forgotten!” he thought he heard this bony apparition mourning, in a voice reminding him of a gibbering shade. Then, with his hands clutched over his breast, the figure reeled and fell; while a crash as of exploding dynamite thudded upon Will’s ears, and the entire building shook.

Knowing the poor sufferer to be beyond his aid, he wandered on. In fast waning hope, he pounded on each door as he passed, calling out fearfully, automatically,

“Ilwanna! Ilwanna!”

But the echoes of his own voice came back to mock him along those twisted aisles.

“Ilwanna! Ilwanna!”

His head swayed in delirium; he gasped and coughed as the hot vapors choked his lungs; and once or twice he fell on a dark stairway. Surely, the one he sought was not to be found here!

BUT still he raised his cry, more feebly now, “Ilwanna! Ilwanna, Ilwanna!” Was it only that he imagined that at last there came an answering call? What was that voice, thin, remote, unreal,

“Will, Will, Will?” Surely, his fevered mind was playing him tricks. But was not the sound repeated, “Will, Will!... This way, Will!... Here, here, here!” No! It must all be a cruel delusion!

Then suddenly his brain had regained its clarity. Suddenly his senses were alert, active. The sound—he knew now that it was not mere imagination!—came from above him, from beyond a twisted flight of stairs. Perhaps it was but the voice of a madman mocking him—still, did it not have a familiar ring?

Up the stairs he dashed, though there came a jolt that seemed almost to shake the building off its

foundations. Beyond a barred door he paused, while his fingers fumbled with the keys. For a moment he could not find any to fit the lock; while from outside there rang a series of thunderous detonations that drowned out the voice from within.

Then the key was turning in its socket; the door swung open; and toward him, with a swooning movement, there sagged a figure which he half recognized, and yet did not recognize, so distraught was she.

“Ilwanna!” he cried; and clasped her even as she was falling to the stone floor.

IT was not until much later that he learned her story: how she had been knocked unconscious yet had escaped serious injury in the second rock-slide in the tunnel, which had finally separated her from Will; how she had been taken by Murkambu’s men to the palace of her father, who had seen through her disguise and in his rage had sentenced her to the Black Tower; how she had been forgotten there, when her father and all his retainers had taken flight, owing to the devastation of Blue Nitrolene; but how, having been provided with more food and better accommodations than ordinary prisoners, she had managed to survive, though she was now at the end of her resources.

Her beautiful cheeks smeared with dirt, her eyes burning and tear-reddened, her lovely hair hanging wildly and disorderly over her face, her limbs shaking with weariness, she looked little more than the ghost of her former self—although after a little time, with rest and food, she would become once more the old radiant Ilwanna.

So, at least, Will thought as he held her, clinging and weeping, in his arms. But only for a few seconds could they remain clasped together.

As if to prove this no time for love making, the house gave another spasmodic heave; while through the narrow slit of the window they could see hungry red tongues of flame reaching toward the cavern roof.

“Come!” Will murmured; and half led, half supported her down the twisted stairway, and into the glaring outer world. He was astonished to note how the erupting crater, with its flaming liquid jets, had widened during his short stay in the tower. Well for him that he had left the building! For, not five minutes after his escape, there came a roar as if the heavens were crashing; a mountain of crimson light jutted upward, with cascades of scattering sparks; and the entire tower, falling like a child’s castle, was lost in the crater’s fuming abysses.

But Will and Ilwanna had hardly time to look back at the dread spectacle. Though their heads ached and their fagged limbs rebelled, somehow they forced their way onward—onward toward the Golden Range, where Will had entered Le-Mur, and where he hoped to find the cave entrance that led back toward the Upper Air.

HOW they managed to reach this haven, after hours of tormented struggling, was more than he was ever able to explain. Everywhere they saw refugees groaning, or lying crushed by fallen stones; everywhere they saw the fissures in the ground widening, flame, smoke and steam pouring forth more voluminously. Yet finally they stood before the narrow tunnel in the earth, which, almost choked with rocks where Will had blasted his way out, showed a dark crevice barely wide enough to permit a man to wriggle through. “The way back to the Upper Air... if we can make it,” murmured Will. “Are you willing to come with me, Ilwanna?”

“I am willing to go to the world’s end with you, beloved.”

As they stood looking back across the Great Cavern from the height of the Golden Range, they saw nothing but a waste of flame and cinders—a landscape dotted with steaming geysers, smoking craters, roofless buildings with their shattered interiors flung about like the entrails of slaughtered monsters.

Through the thickening smoke-clouds, a line of bloody red was spreading all about them; the roof-supporting columns were bent at every angle; waves seethed and rolled and noxious vapors poured where hills and valleys had been; while, with a low rumbling, the very roof began to tremble, and crash.

“Quick, for God’s sake! It’s the end, the end!” groaned Will. And, forcing Ilwana ahead of him, he helped and pushed her through the little black crevice into the cave.

Even as he did so, they were stunned by a deafening roar, which pitched them both forward to the earth. And, while the reverberations still rang in their ears, they stared into a sudden blackness. The lights of Le-Mur had gone out!

As they began creeping through the cave, by the rays of Will’s flashlight, a long blended wail as of myriads of terrorized men and women reached them from the depths of the doomed world.

THREE days later a party of scientists, exploring one of the limestone caverns that threaded the Whitley Range, came across two persons whom at first they took for dead—a man and a woman clasped in one another’s arms, who appeared to have perished of hunger or exhaustion. It was only by degrees that they managed to revive the unconscious victims, who for days lingered near the dread border-line, before at last, thanks to the best of attention, they were restored to life and health.

The reader will, of course, recall the national sensation that was caused when it was found that the man was none other than Will Claybrook, the missing inventor; while the woman, who became his wife as soon as they were able to go through the ceremony, was reported to be a daughter of ancient Le-Mur.

Following his return, Will was a changed man. He no longer gave himself whole-heartedly to science; instead, he concentrated on a book on “The Life and Customs of the Le-Murians,” which, he said, would occupy him for years. But there was a grimness about him, as of a man returned from the other side of the grave. I remember how, one evening when I paid him a visit, he was staring as of old through the eyepiece of the Pellucid Depth Ray; while at his side, shiningly beautiful and statlier than ever, stood the very person whom he had once delighted to observe through the same machine.

“See, Tom,” he said, motioning to the eyepiece, “all that is left of Le-Mur!”

I looked; and before my eyes there spread the enormous reaches of the Great Cavern, the roof in places fallen, and mile-deep abysses scooped out where the floor had once been. From the depths, fuming vapors arose in sultry clouds, illuminated by the dull-red light of smoldering fires; but nowhere could I see even the tatters of a building, even a sign that human life had ever inhabited these voids.

“At last Blue Nitrolene burns itself out!” he stated, solemnly. “A few days more, and the Depth Ray will show us—blackness!”

Then with a growl, he raised an iron rod in the air and swung it as if to demolish the machine,

“Curses on the Depth Ray—which brought the doom of a world!”

“A world that would have brought its own doom, being rotten at the core!” exclaimed Ilwana, leaping forward and restraining her husband’s hand. “Remember also, Will, without the Depth Ray, we would not be together now!”

“Which is worth more to me than all Le-Mur!” he said.

As his hand reached out for hers and they stood smiling at one another, I knew he had indeed spoken the truth.

The End.

Notes and proofing history

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