

The Alien Intelligence

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CHAPTER I - The Mountain of the Moon

BEFORE me, not half a mile away, rose the nearest ramparts of the Mountain of the Moon. It was after noon, and the red sun blazed down on the bare, undulating sandy waste with fearful intensity. The air was still and intolerably hot. Heat waves danced ceaselessly over the uneven sand. I felt the utter loneliness, the wild mystery, and the overwhelming power of the desert. The black cliffs rose cold and solid in the east — a barrier of dark menace. Pillars of black basalt, of dark hornblende, and of black obsidian rose in a precipitous wall of sharp and jagged peaks that curved back to meet the horizon. Needle-like spires rose a thousand feet, and nowhere was the escarpment less than half that high. It was with mingled awe and incipient fear that I first looked upon the Mountain of the Moon.

It was a year since I had left medical college in America to begin practise in Perth, Australia. There I had na uncle who was my sole surviving relative. My companion on the voyage had been Dr. Horace Austen, the well-known radiologist, archeologist, and explorer. He had been my dearest friend. That he was thirty years my senior, had never interfered with our comradeship. It was he who had paid most of my expenses in school. He had left me at Perth, and went on to investigate some curious ruined columns that a traveler had reported in the western part of the Great Victoria Desert. There Austen had simply vanished. He had left Kanowna, and the desert had swallowed him up. But it was his way, when working on a problem, to go into utter seclusion for months at a time.

My uncle was na ardent radio enthusiast, and it was over one of his experimental short wave sets that we picked up the remarkable message from my lost friend that led me to abandon my practise, and, heeding the call of adventure that has always been strong in those of my blood, to seek the half mythical Mountain of the Moon, in the heart of the unexplored region of the Great Victoria Desert of Western Australia.

The message was tantalizingly brief and hard to interpret. We picked it up five times, over a period of two weeks, always just after sunset. Evidently it was sent by one who had not recently practised his knowledge of code, and it seemed that the sender was always in a great hurry, or under a considerable nervous tension, for minor errors and omissions were frequent. The words were invariably the same. I copy them from na old notebook.

“To Winfield Fowler, physician, Perth, Australia: I, Horace Austen, am lost in na unknown new world, where alien terrors reign, that lies in a crater in the Mountain of the

Moon. I implore you to come to my aid, for the sake of mankind. Bring arms, and my equipment — the Rontgen tubes and coils, and the spectrometer. Ascend ladder at west pinnacle. Find my friend Melvar, maiden of the crystal city, whom I left beyond the Silver Lake. Come, for the sake of civilization, and may whoever hears this forward it with all dispatch."

My uncle was inclined to suspect a hoax. But after the message had come over twice I received telegrams from several other radio amateurs who had heard it, and were forwarding it to me. We took the direction of the third call and had amateurs in Adelaide do the same. The lines intersected in the Great Victoria Desert, at a point very near that at which Wellington located the Mountain of the Moon, when he sighted it and named it in 1887.

Knowing Austen, as I did, to be intensely human as a man, but grave and serious as a scientist, it was impossible for me to take the message as a practical joke, as my uncle, deriding the possibility of my friend's being imprisoned in "an unknown new world," insisted it was. It was equally impossible for one of my impetuous and adventurous disposition to devote himself to any prosaic business when so attractive a mystery was beckoning him away. Then I would never, in any case, have hesitated to go to Austen's aid, if, I knew him to be in need.

I got together the apparatus he had mentioned — it was some equipment he happened to have left with me as he went on — as well as my emergency medicine kit, a heavy rifle, two .45 Colt automatics, and a good supply of ammunition and waited for more explicit signals. But the calls had never come regularly, and after the fifth no more were heard. Having waited another irksome week, I bade my uncle farewell and got on the train. I left the railway at Kanowna, and bought three ponies. I rode one and packed provisions, equipment, and water bottles on the other two. Nothing need be said of the perils of the journey. Three weeks later I came in sight of the mountain.

Wellington had christened it as he did because of an apparent similarity to the strange cliffrimmed craters of the moon, and the appellation was an apt one. The crags rose almost perpendicularly from the sand to the jagged rim. To climb them was clearly out of the question. The rock was polished slick by wind-blown sands for many feet, but rough and sharp above. To my left, at the extreme west point of the great curve, was a dark needle spire that towered three hundred feet above its fellows. I knew that it must be Austen's "west pinnacle." What sort of ladder I was to ascend, I had little idea.

As the sun sank back of the rolling sea of sand, dark purple shadows rose about the barrier, and I was struck with deep forebodings of the evil mystery that lay beyond it. The gold of the desert changed to silver gray, and the gray faded swiftly, while the deep purple mantle swept up the peaks, displacing even the deep red crowns that lay like splashes of blood upon the summits. Still I felt, or fancied, a strange spirit of terror that lurked behind the mountain, even in the night.

Quickly I made camp. Just two of the ponies were left, and they were near death (I have passed over the hardships of my trip). I hobbled them on a little patch of grass and brush that grew where water had run from the cliff; pitched my little tent, and found brush to start a tiny fire. I ate supper, with but a scanty cup of water, then, oppressed by the vast mysterious peaks that loomed portentously in the east, shutting out the starlight, I went in the tent and sought my blanket. Then came the first of those terrible and inexplicable occurrences that led up to the great adventure.

CHAPTER II – The Abyss of the Terror-light

FIRST I heard a faint whispering sound, or rather a hiss, infinitely far away, and up, I thought, over the cliffs. Then the cloth of the tent was lighted by a faint red glow thrown on it from above. I shivered and the strange spell of the mountain and the desert fell heavier upon me. I wanted to go out and investigate; but unfamiliar terror held me powerless. I gripped my automatic and waited tensely. The scarlet radiance shone ever brighter through the cloth. The sound turned to a hissing, shrieking scream. It was deafening, and it plunged straight down. It seemed to pause, to hover overhead. The red glare was almost blinding. Abruptly the tent was blown down by a sudden tempest of wind. For perhaps a minute the terror hung about me. I lay there in a strange paralysis of fear, while a hurricane of wind tore the canvas upon me. I heard upon the tempest, above that awful whistling, a wild mad laugh that rang against the cliff, weirdly appalling. It was utterly inhuman, not even the laugh of a madman. Just once it rang out, and afterwards I imagined it had been my fancy.

Then the light and the sound swept up and away. With belated courage I tore my way from under the cloth. The stars were like jewels in the westward sky, where the zodiacal light was still visible. The ominous blackness of the mountain blotted out the eastern stars and the peaks were lighted by a vague and flickering radiance of scarlet, like the reflection of unpleasant fires beyond. Strange pulsing, exploring fingers of red seemed to thrust themselves up from behind the cliff. Somehow they gave me the feeling that na

incredibly great, incredibly evil personality, lurked beyond. The crimson light shone weirdly on the wild summits of the mountain, as if they were smeared with blood.

I threw more brush on the fire, and crouched over it, feeling uncomfortably alone and terrified. When the flames had flared up I looked about for the ponies, seeking companionship even in them. They were gone! At first I thought they had broken their hobbles and run off, but I could neither see nor hear them, and they had been in no condition to run far. I walked about a little, to look for them, and then went back to the fire. I sat there and watched the eerie, unwholesome glare that shone over the mountain. No longer did I doubt the existence of Austen's "world where alien terrors reign." I knew, even as I had felt when I first saw the mountain, that strange life and power lurked beyond it.

The Ladder Found

PRESENTLY I stretched the tent again, and lay down, but I did not sleep.

At dawn I got up and went to look for the ponies. I climbed one of the low dunes and gazed over the gray infinity of sand, but not a sign of them rewarded my look. I tried to trail them. I found where they had been hobbled, and followed the tracks of each to a place where the hoofs had cut deep in the sandy turf. Beyond there was no trace. Then I was certain of what I had already known, that the Thing had carried them away.

Then I found something stranger still — the prints of bare human feet, half erased by the wind that had blown while the terror had hung there. That unearthly laugh, and the footprints! Was there a land of madmen behind the mountain? And what was the thing that had come and gone in the night? Those were questions I could not answer, but daylight dulled my wondering fear.

The sun would not rise on my side of the mountain until nearly noon, and the cold dark shadow of the cliff was upon me when the desert all about was a shimmering, white in the heat of the sun. Austen's call had mentioned a ladder. I set out to find it. Just north of the peak I came upon it, running straight up like a silver ribbon to the top of the cliff. It was not the clumsy affair of ropes that I expected. In fact, I at once abandoned any idea that Austen had made it at all. It was of na oddlooking white metal and it seemed very old, although it was corroded but little. The rungs were short white bars, riveted to long straps which were fastened on the rock by spikes of the same silvery metal. I have said that the mountain rises straight from the sand. And the ladder goes on into the ground.

That suggests that the sand has piled in on the base of the mountain since the ladder was put there. At any rate, I am sure that it is incredibly old.

I went back to camp; packed together my guns, a little food, and Austen's equipment and started up the ladder. Although it was no more than six hundred feet to the top, heavily laden as I was, I got very tired before I reached it. I stopped several times to rest. Once, looking down on the illimitable sea of rolling sand, with the tiny tent and the sharp shadow of the mountain the only definite features, I had a terrible attack of vertigo, and my fears of the night returned, until I almost wished I had never started up the ladder. But I knew that if I were suddenly back in Perth again I would be more eager than ever to set out upon the adventure.

At last I reached the top and crawled up in the mouth of a narrow canyon, with the black stone walls rising straight to the peaks on either side. Down the crevice was a smooth curving pathway, very much worn, it seemed, more by time than human feet. It was not yet noon. I waited a few minutes to rest; then walked up the path with a very keen curiosity as to where it led. It grew so deep that the sky overhead was but a dark blue ribbon in which I saw Venus gleaming whitely. It widened. I walked out on a broad stone platform. And below me lay — the abyss.

I stood on the brink of a great chasm whose bottom must have been miles, even, below sea level. The farther walls of the circular pit — they must have been forty miles away — were still black in the shadow of the morning. Clouds of red and purple mist hung in the infinities of space the chasm contained, and completely hid the farther half of the floor. Beneath me, so far away that it was as if I looked on another world, was a deep red shelf, a scarlet plain weird as the deserts of Mars. To what it owed its color I could not tell. In the midst of the red, rose a mountain whose summit was a strange crown of scintillating fire. It looked as though it were capped, not with snow, but with na immense heap of precious jewels, set on fire with the glory of the sun, and blazing with a splendidous shifting flame of prismatic light. And the crimson upland sloped down — to "the Silver Lake." It was a lake shaped like a crescent moon, the horns reaching to the mountains on the north and the south. In the hollow of the crescent beyond, low hills rose, impenetrable banks of purple mist lying back of them to the dark wall in the distance. The lake gleamed like quicksilver and light waves ran upon it, reflecting the sunlight in cold blue fire. It seemed that faint purple vapors were floating up from the surface. Set like a picture in the dark red landscape, with the black cliffs about, the argent lake was very white, and very bright.

CHAPTER III – Down the Silver Ladder

FOR a long, long time I gazed into the abyss, lost in the wonder and the mystery of it. Meanwhile the sun climbed over and lit the farther rim, which still was black or dully red, because of the dark colors of the volcanic rocks of which it is composed. The scene was so , vast, so strange, so wildly beautiful and unearthly, that it seemed almost' a dream, instead of na ominous reality. It was hard to realize that somewhere upon the red plain, or along the shores of the Silver Lake, or perhaps beneath the banks of mist beyond, Austen was — or had been — alone, and in distress.

I wondered, too, from what part of this strange world had come the thing of the whistling sound and the red light, which had taken the ponies.

It was well after noon before I ate a little lunch and took thought of the matter of descent. I saw that a second ladder led down in a fine line of silver until it disappeared above the crimson upland, miles below. I climbed over the brink and started down. Descending was easier than climbing had been, but I had infinitely farther to go. The soles of my shoes were cut through, and my hands became red and blistered on the rungs. Sometimes, when I was too tired to go on, I slung myself to the ladder with a piece of rope from my pack, while I rested.

Steadily the black walls rose higher about me. The red plateau beneath, the mountain with its crown of flaming gems, and the strange white lake beyond, came nearer and nearer.

I was still half a mile above the scarlet plain when the shadow of the western wall was flung fast over the valley floor, and the light purple mists beyond the argent lake deepened their hue to a dark and ominous purple-red.

But the Silver Lake did not darken. It seemed luminous. It gleamed with a bright, metallic silvery luster, even when the shadow had fallen upon it. Whenever I rested; I searched keenly the whole visible floor of the abyss, but nowhere was any life or motion to be seen.

With a growing apprehension, I realized that I would not have time to reach the ground before dark. I had no desire to be sticking like a fly to the face of the cliff when the Thing that had made the red light was moving about. Disregarding my fatigue and pain, I clambered down as fast as I could force my wearied limbs to move. The process of motion had become almost automatic. Hands and feet moved regularly, rhythmically,

without orders from the brain. But sometimes they fumbled or slipped. Then I had to grasp, frenzied, at the rungs to save my life.

Night fell like a black curtain rolled quickly over the top of the pit, but the half-moon of the Silver Lake still shone with its white metallic light. And strange, moving shapes of red appeared in the mist in the hollow of the crescent. The light that fell upon the rock was faint, but still enough to help, and still I hurried—forcing hands and feet to follow down and find the rungs. And fearfully I looked over my shoulder at the bank of mist.

Suddenly a long pale finger of red—a delicate rosy ray—shot high out of it. And up the vague pathway it sped, a long slender pencil of crimson light—a narrow, sharp-tipped scarlet shape—high into the night, and over and around in a long arching curve. Down it plunged, and back into the mist. Presently I heard its sound—that strange whistling sigh that rolled majestically and rose and fell, vast as the roar of na erupting volcano. Other things sprang out of the purple bank, slender searching needles of brilliant scarlet, sweeping over the valley and high into the starlit sky above.

Following paths that were smooth and arched, with incredible speed, they swept about like a swarm of strange insects, always with amazing ease, and always shooting back into the cloud, leaving faint purple tracks behind them. And the great rushing sounds rose and fell. Those lights were incredible entities, intelligent—and evil.

They flew, more often than anywhere else, over the crown of lights upon the hill—the gems still shone with a faint beautiful glow of mingled colors. Whenever one swept near the mountain, a pale blue ray shot toward it from the cap of jewels. And the red things fled from the ray. More and more the flying things of crimson were drawn to the mountain top, wheeling swiftly and ceaselessly, ever evading the feeble beams of blue. Their persistence was inhuman—and terrible. They were like insects wheeling about a light.

All the while I climbed down as fast as I could, driving my worn-out limbs beyond the limit of endurance, while I prayed that the things might not observe me. Then one passed within a half mile, with a deep awful whistling roar, flinging ahead its dusky red pathway, and hurtling along with a velocity that is inconceivable. I saw that it was a great red body, a cylinder with tapering ends, with a bright green light shining on the forward part. It did not pause, but swept on along its comet-like path, and down behind the Silver Lake. Behind it was left a vague purple phosphorescent track, like the path of a meteor, that lasted several minutes.

After it was gone, I hurried on for a few minutes, breathing easier. Then another went by, so close that a hot wind laden with the purple mist of its track blew against my face.

I was gripped with deathly, unutterable terror. I let myself down in the haste of desperation. Then the third one came. As it approached it paused in its path, and drifted slowly and deliberately toward me. The very cliff trembled with the roaring blast of its sound. The green light in the forward end stared at me like a terrible, evil eye.

Exactly how it happened I never knew. I suppose my foot slipped, or my bleeding hands failed to grasp a rung. I have a vague recollection of the nightmare sensation of falling headlong, of the air whistling briefly about my ears, of the dark earth looming up below. I think I fell on my back, and that my head struck a rock.

In the Red Scrub

THE next I knew it was day, and the sun was shining in my eyes. I struggled awkwardly and painfully to my feet. My whole body was bruised and sore, and the back of my head was caked with dried blood. My exhausted muscles had stiffened during the night, and to stand upon my cut and blistered feet was torturing. But I had something to be thankful for — that I had been within a few feet of the ground when I fell; and that the red thing had departed and left me lying there, perhaps thinking me dead.

I leaned against the base of the metal ladder and looked about, I had fallen into a thicket of low red bushes. All about grew low thick brush, covering the slightly rolling plain. The plants were scarcely knee-high, bearing narrow, feathered leaves of red. The delicate, fern-like sprays of crimson rippled in the breeze like waves on a sea of blood. The leaves had a peculiar bright and greasy appearance and a strange pungent odor. The shrubs bore innumerable tiny snow-white flowers that gleamed like stars against the deep red background.

I think that the red vegetation had evolved from a species of cycad. Undoubtedly the greater crater had been isolated from the outer world when the great tree-ferns were reigning throughout the earth. And, as I was presently to find, the order of evolution in the deep warm pit had been vastly different from that which had produced man as its highest form of life. Presently I was to meet far stranger and more amazing things than the red bush. I am inclined to believe that the extraordinary color may have been due to the quality of the atmosphere, perhaps to the high pressure, or to the purple vapors that ever rose from the region beyond the Silver Lake.

Nowhere did I see any living thing, nor did I hear any sound of life. In fact one of the strange things of the place was the complete absence of the lower forms of life, and even of the smaller insects. The silence hung oppressively. It grew intolerably monotonous—maddening.

Far away to the right and to the left the walls of the pit rose straight and black to the azure infinity that arched the top. To the left of me, five or six miles away, towered the gem-crowned hill, its summit a blaze of ever-changing polychromatic flame. Beyond it, all along the east, the red plateau fell away to the Silver Lake, which lay like a curved scimitar of polished steel, with the faint bank of purple mist shrouding the low red hills that rose inside the curve beyond. The sun was just above the eastern peaks, shining purple through the mist.

After a time I limped slowly down the nearest of the little valleys. As I went my roving eye caught the bright glitter of brass on the ground at my feet. Searching in the red shrubs, I picked up three fired cartridges for a .45 calibre automatic. I held them in my hand and gazed over the weird scene before me, lost in wonder. They were concrete proof that Austin had passed this way, had here fought off some danger. He must yet be somewhere in this strange crater. But where was I to find “Melvar, maiden of the crystal city,” and what was she to do for me?

Presently I went on. I wanted water to bathe my cuts and bruises. I was very thirsty as well as hungry. My pack was na irksome burden, but I did not discard it, and I carried the heavy rifle ready in my hand. I was still feeling very weak. After a painful half mile I came to a tiny pool in a thicket of the red scrub. I lay down and drank the cool clear water until I was half sick. I threw away the remnants of my shoes and bathed my feet.

A Curious Sight

SUDDENLY my attention was arrested by a crystal clashing sound. There was a marching rhythm in it, and the clatter of weapons. I crouched down the shrubbery and peered fearfully about. I saw a line of men, queerly equipped soldiers, marching, in single file over the nearest knoll. They seemed to be wearing a closely fitting chain mail of silvery metal, and they had helmets, breastplates and shields that threw off the sunlight in scintillant flashes of red, as if made of rubies. And their long swords flashed like diamonds. Their crystal armor tinkled as they came, in time to their marching feet.

One, whom I took to be the leader, boomed out na order in a hearty, mellow voice. They passed straight by, within fifty yards of me. I saw that they were tall men, of

magnificent physique, white skinned, with blond hair and blue eyes. On they went, in the direction of the fire-topped mountain, until they passed out of sight in a slight declivity, and the music died away.

It is needless to say that I was excited as by nothing that I had seen before. A race of fair-haired men in a Australian valley. What a sensational discovery! I supposed that they had built the metal ladder and come down it into the valley, but from whence had they come? Or was the Mountain of the Moon itself the cradle of humanity, the Garden of Eden?

Then the crystal weapons of the soldiery suggested that they used some transparent crystalline substance in lieu of metal, and that the iridescent crown upon the mountain might be the city of the race. Was it Austen's "crystal city?" That would suggest a high civilization, but I saw no sign of the mechanical devices that are the outstanding features of our own civilized achievement. Certainly the soldiers had carried no modern weapons.

Then I thought of the footprints and the eerie laugh. I wondered what contact. Austen had had with these people. Had they been friends or foes? I wondered if it had been the men of the crystal city who had paid me a visit outside the cliffs. If so, the red torpedo-shapes of the night must be aircraft, and they, must have advanced the art of aerial navigation to a very high degree.

I determined, first of all, to do some spying, and find out as much as possible about the strange race before I revealed my presence. I was not in a very good trim for battle, and I had taken much pains for concealment when the men passed. But I had little doubt that my guns were so far superior to their crystal swords that I could fight them at any odds if they proved unfriendly.

So presently I bound my feet with bandages from my medicine kit, attended as best I could to the wound on the back of my head, and walked slowly on the direction of the mountain, keeping in the cover of the valleys as much as possible. Although I could limp painfully along, the red vegetation offered me no very serious impediment to my progress. The low bushes crushed easily underfoot, burdening the air with their unfamiliar, pungent odor. The country was rolling, the low hills and level valleys all covered crimson with the scrub, gigantic boulders, scattered here and there. The Silver Lake shimmered in the distance — a bright, white, metallic sheet.

The gem-capped mountain rose before me until I saw that the gaunt black sides rose a full thousand feet to the crown of blazing crystal. And as I drew nearer, I saw that

indeed the gems were buildings, of a massive, fantastic architecture. A city of crystal! Prismatic fires of emerald-green, and ruby-red, and sapphire-blue, poured out in a mingled flood of iridescence from its slender spires and great towers, its central ruby dome and the circling battlements of a hundred flashing hues.

CHAPTER IV – Melvar of Astran

JUST before noon I staggered into a little dell that was covered with unusually profuse growths of the crimson plants. Along a little trickling stream of water they were waist high, bearing abundantly the star-shaped flowers, and small golden-brown fruits. Suddenly there was a rustling in the thicket and the head and shoulders of a young woman rose abruptly out of the red brush. In her hand she held a woven basket, half full of the fruits. In my alarm I had thrown up the rifle. But soon lowered it and grinned in confusion when I realized that it was a girl, and by far the most beautiful one I had ever seen. I have always been awkward in the presence of a beautiful woman, and for a few minutes – I did nothing but stand and stare at her, while her quizzical dark, blue eyes inscrutably returned my look.

She was clad in a slight garment, green in color, that seemed to be woven of a fine-spun metal. Her hair was long and golden, fastened behind her shapely head with a circlet — a thin band cut evidently from a single monster ruby. Her features were fine and delicate, and she had a surpassing grace of figure. That her slender arms were stained to the elbows with the red juice of the plants—she had been picking the golden fruits—did not detract from her beauty. I was struck—and I will admit it, conquered—by her face. For a little time she stood very erect, looking at me with na odd expression, and then she spoke, enunciating the words very carefully, in a rich golden voice.

The language was English!

She said, “Are you—na American?”

“At your service completely,” I told her, “Winfield Fowler, of White Deer, Texas, and New York City, not to mention other points. But I own to some surprise at finding a knowledge of the idiom in a denizen of so remote a locality.”

“I can understand,” she smiled. “But I think you could talk—more simply. So you are Winfield, who came with Austen across the great—ocean from America ?”

“You guessed it,” I said, trying to keep my growing excitement in hand, while I marveled at her beauty. “Is mind reading common in these parts?”

“Doctor Austen—the American—told me about you, his friend. And he gave me two books. Tennyson’s poems, and—‘The Pathfinder.’”

“So you have seen Austen?” I cried in real astonishment. “Are you Melvar? Are you the ‘maiden of the crystal city?’”

“I am Melvar,” she told me. “And Austen stopped in Astran one sutar—that is thirty-six days.”

“Where is he now?” I eagerly demanded.

“He was a strange man,” the golden voice replied. “He did not fear the Krimlu, as do the men of Astran. He walked off toward the pass in the north that leads around—around the Silver Lake, he called it. He had been watching the Krimlu as they came at night, and doing strange things with some stuff he took from—the Silver Lake. While he was here, the hunters brought in one of the—” again she hesitated, at a loss for a word. “—The Purple Ones,” she concluded. “He took that to examine it.”

“What are the Krimlu?” I exclaimed. “What—or who—are the Purple Ones? What is the Silver Lake?”

“You are a man of many questions,” she laughed. For a moment she hesitated, with her blue eyes resting on my face.

“The Krimlu, so say the old men of Astran, are the spirits of the dead who come back from the land beyond the Silver Lake to watch the living, and to carry off the evil for their food. So the priests taught us, and so I believed until Austen came and told me of the world that is beyond. He told the Elders of the outer world, but they put upon him the curse of the sun, and drove him away. And indeed it is well that he was ready to go so willingly beyond the Silver Lake, for Jorak would have offered him to the Purple Sun had he been in the city another night.”

Suddenly she must have become conscious of the intensity of my unthinking gaze, for she abruptly dropped her eyes, and flushed a little.

“Go on,” I urged her. “What about the Purple Ones and the Silver Lake? Your account is tainly entertaining, if somewhat more mystifying than illuminating. At this rate you will have me a raving maniac in na hour, but the process is aot unpleasant. Proceed.”

Fowler Grows Bold

SHE looked up at me, smiled, looked off to the side, then let her eyes return to mine with curious speculation in them. “What is the Silver Lake,” she went on, “you know as well as I, though Austen tried to find its secret. The touch of its water is death—

a death that is terrible. And the Purple Ones—you will see them soon enough! They are strange beings who come, no one knows whence, into the land of Astran. The priests tell us that they are ‘The Avengers of the Purple Sun’ — but did you come down the ladder as Austen did?”

“Most of the way in the same manner,” I told her. “I finished the descent rather faster than he did, I imagine.”

“Is there really,” she asked, “a broad world beyond, with fields and forests that are green, and seas that are of clear blue water, and a sun that is not purple, but white? Such Austen told me, but the elders say that the ladder is the path to the Purple Sun, and beyond is nothing. Is it true that there is a great nation of the men of your race, a nation of men who know the art of fire that Austen showed us, and greater arts, who can travel in ships over water and through the air like the Krimlu?”

“Yes,” I said, “the world is that, and more, but, in all of it, I have never seen a girl so beautiful as you.”

It is not my habit to make such speeches to ladies, but I was feeling a bit light-headed on that morning, as a reaction from my terrible adventure, and I was rather intoxicated by her charm.

She smiled, evidently not displeased, and looked away again, apparently composing her expression with difficulty. There was a suspicious twinkle in her dark blue eyes.

“Tell me why you have come into this land,” she asked abruptly.

“Austen sent for me to come to his aid.” I replied.

“You and Austen are not like the men of Astran,” she mused. “Not one of them ever went out to face the Krimlu or even the Purple Ones, of his own free will. You must be brave.”

“Rather, ignorant,” I said. “Since I have seen the ‘Krimlu,’ as you call the flying lights, I am about ready to give up my courage of any kind.” Then, because my exhausted condition had robbed me of my ordinary sense of responsibility, I did such a thing as I had never dared before. The girl was standing close before me, matchlessly beautiful, infinitely desirable. Her eyes were bright, and the sunlight glistened in her golden hair. And—well, I admit that I did not try very hard to resist, the temptation to kiss her. I felt her arm at my back, a sudden quick thrust of her lithe body. The next I knew I was lying on my back, and she was bending over me, with tears in her eyes.

“Oh,” she cried. “I didn’t know. Your head! It is bleeding. And your hands and feet! I didn’t notice !”

So I was compelled to lie there while the beautiful stranger very tenderly dressed and bandaged the cut on my head. In truth, I doubt that I would have been able to get up immediately. The touch of her cool fingers was very light and deft. Once her golden hair brushed against my cheek. Her nearness was very pleasant. I knew that I loved her completely, though I had never taken much stock in love at first sight.

Presently she had finished. Then she said, “When Austen gave me the books he left a letter for any man of the outside who might happen to come to Astran. You must come with me to the city, to get it, and to rest until you can walk without limping so painfully. Then, if you will, you can go on around the northern pass. Perhaps you can find Austen. But the Krimlu are mighty. No man of Astran has ever dared oppose them. No man who has ever gone into that accursed region has ever been seen again.”

CHAPTER V - Astran, the Crystal City

THE sun dropped beneath the rim, and the purple dusk began to thicken and to creep over the valley floor. I took up my precious equipment, and Melvar and I walked off through the red brush in the direction of the mountain. The vast strange buildings of the city of gems were still glowing with soft color, and the cold, bright surface of the Silver Lake flashed often into sight beyond the rolling eminences. Presently we came to a well-worn path through the crimson scrub, but I saw nothing to indicate that anyone had thought of paving or improving it. But the Astranians did not seem to have much energy for any kind of public work. Their material civilization appeared to be on a rather low scale. In fact they supplied their wants in the way of food entirely with the abundant fruit of the red bushes. As I had guessed from the girl’s remarks, they did not even have the use of fire. Indeed the great physical and mental development of the race and the splendid city in which it lived was strangely contrasted with their absolute lack of scientific knowledge.

Our pace was hastened by thoughts of the terrors that night would bring, and perhaps because of them, we walked nearer one another, and presently we were hurrying along, hand in hand. About us the purple night deepened and, beyond the argent brilliance of the Silver Sea, the strange evil of the night gathered itself for the attack.

At last we came to the narrow path that wound up the side of the mountain to the splendid palaces that crowned it. We hurried came to a great arched gate in the emerald wall, and entered. The huge, incredibly magnificent buildings were scattered irregularly about the summit, with broad spaces between them. Here and there were paved courts of the silvery metal, which must have been na aluminum bronze, but the open ground was for the most part grown up in rank thickets of the red brush. The great building showed the wear and breakage of ages. Here and there were great heaps of gleaming crystal, where wonderful edifices had fallen, with the brush grown up around them. Incredible as it may seem, I think the old civilization of Astran had possessed a science that was able to synthetize diamonds and other precious stones, in quantities sufficient even for use as building stone. Later I had na opportunity to examine bits of the fallen masonry.

Towering above all, on the very peak of the mountain, was a great ruby dome, vast as the dome of St. Peter's, and mounted upon the center of the top was a huge machine that resembled nothing so much as a great naval gun, though it was made of crystal and white metal. A little group of men were gathered about it, and as I watched they swung the great tube about, and a narrow ray of pale blue light poured out of it. And down on the plain below, where the practise beam had struck, a great boulder flashed into sudden incandescence. In their exploration of the ultraviolet spectrum, our own scientists have found rays that are strangely destructive to life, and considerable progress has been made in the development of a destructive beam of wireless energy. But later I was to meet a far more terrible ray weapon than that slender blue beam.

“With that,” said Melvar, “our people fight off the Krimlu at night. But the Krimlu are so many that sometimes they are able to land and take our people. If only we had more of the beams! But there is no man in all Astran who knows how the light is made, or anything save that the blue light shines out to destroy when rock of a certain kind is put into the tube. Austen wished to examine it, and spoke of something he called ‘radium ore’ but the priests forbade. Indeed, his curiosity is one of the reasons Jorak had for driving him away.”

Standing about the ill-kept streets were a few of the people of the crystal city. All were of magnificent physique, and intelligent looking, whiteskinned, and fair haired. All wore garments that seemed of spun metal, and gleaming crystal weapons. Most of them were hurrying along, intent on affairs of their own, but a few gathered around us almost as soon as we stepped in the gate. I felt that they were hostile to me. They questioned Melvar in a tongue that was strange to my ears, then became engaged in a noisy debate

among themselves. Their glances toward me were furtive and sullen, and their eyes had the look of men crazed by fear.

Safe!

MELVAR was saying something in a conciliatory tone, and I was swinging my rifle into position for use, when there was a sudden shout from the gate of the city, and the clashing of crystal weapons. The interruption was most welcome to me. The crowd turned eagerly to the new arrivals. I saw that they were a band of soldiers, possibly the same that had passed me in the morning. Slung to a pole carried between the foremost two, was a strange thing. Weirdly colored and fearfully mutilated as it was, I saw that it was the naked body of a human being. The head was cut half off, and dangling at a grotesque angle. The hair was very long and very white, flying in loose disorder. The features were withered and wrinkled, indeed the whole form was incredibly emaciated. It was the corpse of a woman. The flesh was deep purple!

As I stood staring at the thing in horror, there was laughter and cheering in the crowd, and a little child ran up to stab at the thing with a miniature diamond sword. Melvar touched my arm.

“Come,” she whispered. “Quickly. The people do not like your coming. They did not like the things Austen told of the world outside, for the priests teach that there is no such world. It is well that the hunters came when they did with the Purple One. And let us hope that the priests of the Purple Sun do not hear of you.”

As she spoke she led me rapidly away through a tangle of the red brush, and through a colonnade of polished sapphire. Then she quickly led the way down a deserted alley, across another patch of the red shrubbery, and down a short flight of steps into a chamber that was dark.

“Wait here,” she commanded. “I must leave you. I think that Jorak has had spies upon me, and if I were too long absent he might grow suspicious. He was the enemy of my father, and some day my brother will slay him. But sometimes I am afraid of the way he looks at me. However there is no danger now. If the priests hear, I will somehow get you out of Astran. I think they will not seek you here, whatever may happen. My brother will bring the message from Austen, and food and drink. May you rest well, and have faith in me!”

She ran up the steps, and left me standing in the darkness, in a state of uncomfortable indecision. I did not like the turn that affairs had taken. It is never pleasant

to be alone in the dark in a strange and dangerous place. ^1 would have much preferred to take my chances out on the open plain, with nothing but the moving lights to fear, terrible as they were, than here in this strange city, full of ill-disposed savages. A diamond knife will kill a man just as effectively and completely as the weirdest death that ever roamed the night.

For a time I stood waiting tensely, with my rifle in my hand, but I was very tired and weak. Presently I got out my flashlight and examined the place. It was a little cell, apparently hewn in the living rock of the mountain. There was nothing in the way of furniture except a sort of padded shelf, or bed, at the bade I sat down upon it, and presently went to sleep there, though I had no intention of doing so.

Austen's Letter

THE next I knew, someone was shaking my arm, and shouting strange words in my ear. I opened my eyes. Standing before me was a young man. In one hand he held a crystal globe filled with a glowing, phosphorescent stuff, faintly lighting the little apartment. I sat up slowly, for my limbs were stiff. The gun was still in my hand. Without saying anything more, the young fellow pointed to a tray that he had set by me on the shelf. It contained a crystal pitcher of aromatic liquid, and a dash of the yellow fruit. I gulped down some of the drink, and ate a few of the fruits, feeling refreshed almost immediately. Then the boy — he was not more than sixteen years of age — thrust into my hand na envelope addressed in the familiar handwriting of Austen. He handed me the light and walked up the stone stairs.

With feeling that well may be imagined, I tore open the envelope and read, in the faint light of the glowing bulb, the words of my old friend.

“Astran, in the Mountain of the Moon, June 16, 1927.

“To whomsoever of my own race this may be delivered:

“Since you must so far have traveled the mysterious dangers of this strange world, it is needless for me to dwell upon them. I write this brief missive for the information of anyone who shall happen to find the way in here in the future, and in order that the riddle of my own disappearance may some time be cleared up, if I fail to return. For I intend to explore the region beyond this lake—I call it the Silver Lake—or to lose my life in the attempt.

“My name is Horace Austen. I came to the Great Victoria Desert to investigate the sculptured columns reported by Hamilton, far to the west cf here. I found the ruins and

incredibly ancient they are. They must date from fifty thousand years ago, at the latest. Among them was na amazing pictographical record of a race of men driven by the drying up of their country to emigrate to the crater of a great mountain nearby. There was no mistaking the meaning. I was, of course, intensely interested, for nothing of the kind had ever been reported in Australia, and certainly the people depicted were not Bushmen.

“It happened that I remembered Wellington’s account of the Mountain of the Moon, whose northern cliff was followed for a few miles by his route of 1887. That appeared to be the best chance for the great crater described on the columns. It was but natural for me to decide to investigate it. There is no use for me to dwell upon my hardships, but the last of my water was drunk when I found: the ladder, which was located just as the inscriptions indicated.

“I reached the red plain without accident, and found the fruit of the strange vegetation a palatable and nourishing food. So far I have escaped the red lights that haunt the night, and it is their mystery that I am determined to solve. I went down to the metallic lake, and investigated it. I confess myself quite unable to account either for the nature or for the incredible origin of the fluid. With proper precaution it can be studied without great difficulty, but since I am almost entirely without apparatus, I have learned little enough about it.

“I had been in the crater a week when I decided to approach the city of jewels on the mountain. I have been in Astran over a month, but on account of the savagery and ignorance of the people, and the oppressive rule of the priesthood, I have not been on very friendly relations with them—with the exception of the girl, Melvar, who seems far above the others of her race, and who has been my friend from the first. I have been able to learn but little from them, although I have acquired a fair knowledge of the language. My instructor in it, the beautiful Melvar, is showing a keen desire to learn English, of which she is gaining a command with remarkable speed, and is developing, as well, na insatiable curiosity about the outer world.

“The sentiment against me has been ever running higher, and tomorrow I shall leave the crystal city, and endeavor to round the sea in the north and to reach the mist-veiled land beyond. My only regret in leaving is that I shall see Melvar no more.

“I wish there were some way to secure her the advantages of a civilized education.

“These may be my last words to the world, if, indeed, they ever come into the hands of a civilized man. And I know that sooner or later the crater will be discovered and entered. My chief purpose in writing this, aside from the satisfaction of leaving na

account of my own doings is to state my firm belief, I may say, my certain knowledge, that the strange things that may be observed here, supernatural or incredible as they may appear, result from perfectly natural forces in the control of a civilized power that may not be much above our own advancements.

Horace Austen”

CHAPTER VI – Fowler Recovers

I READ it in the faint glow of the phosphorescent globe, and read it again. So Austen was beyond the crescent, if he had been able to carry out his plan. The date of the letter was ten months back. Then the radio message had probably come from the other side. And why had it been sent? Austen was not one to appeal for aid for himself alone. Had he feared some general danger to the human race? I thought of his phrase, “for the sake of mankind,” and shuddered at a picture of the red lights sweeping like destroying angels over a great city like New York decimating the terrorized population.

I tried to think what was best for me to do, if ever I got out of Astran alive. I supposed that Austen had been able to round the Silver Lake in the north. I should be able to follow him. Clearly there was nothing for me to do but to find out as much about this strange world as possible, and to get the equipment to him as soon as I could do so.

I stayed in the cellar-like home for a week. Twice each day the young chap came to bring food and drink. He knew but a few words of English, and during the hour or so he stayed each time I had him to try teaching me the language of Astran. But my progress was slow, and I never learned more than a few score words. The language seemed much more complex, even, than English, with bewildering rules of inflection. But I developed quite a liking for the boy. He had a simple, straight forward manner, and a good sense of humor. His name was Naro. He was the brother of Melvar, and two years younger. Their father, it seemed, had been carried off several years before, when the flying lights made a great raid, and the mother had soon after fallen a victim to the sacrificial rites of the hated Jorak. And the boy himself bore the scars of Wounds he had suffered a few months before in a terrific battle with one of the Purple Ones, as those monsters were called, which so mystified me then, and with which I had such terrible experiences later.

On the second day Melvar came. She brought a great flask of aromatic oil that she poured over my wounds. It must have been remarkably healing, for in a few days I found myself entirely recovered. Before she left she told me that the priests had heard of my arrival, and that it was whispered among the people that I was a supernatural being, sent

as na omen of na attack by the Krimlu. She told me, too, that there was talk that a sacrifice would soon be offered at the altar of the Purple Sun, to appease the angry Spirits of the dead. Sweet and innocent child, she seemed to have no fear that she, who had brought me into the city, would be the sacrifice, and I did nothing to let her know my misgivings, although I did propose that we leave the city together as soon as possible. How I hated to see her leave the apartment!

The Shrine of the Purple Sun

DURING the following days I questioned Naro constantly as to the doings of his sister, and of the Astranians, but I was able to elicit no very satisfactory information, except that none of the Krimlu had been seen for several days, and that the headmen of the nation were beginning to expect a raid in force. Also I persuaded him to keep a very close watch on the movements of Melvar, and to come to me at once if Jorak made any attempt to get her into his power, or if the sacrificial ceremony was begun with the victim unselected.

During the interminable periods when I was alone, I was driven almost insane by the monotony and the anxiety of my existence. But I had my scientific equipment, and I had the boy to bring me a few assorted fragments of the crystal building stone, which I tested and found to be real gems, of several varieties. Many of the gems were simple enough in chemical formula, and composed of the most common elements, so the synthesis of them by scientific means is not unreasonable.

For example, it is a well-known fact that diamond is just a crystal form of carbon, which element occurs in three allotropic forms. Those three forms are diamond, graphite, which also crystallizes, and amorphous carbon, of which charcoal is a form. Since carbon occurs in the air in carbon dioxide, it is not impossible that latterday science would be able to manufacture diamonds from the air. Sapphires are aluminum oxide, or alumina, colored with a little cobalt, and rubies are composed of the same oxide, with a trace of chromium, to which the color is due. A clay-bed would supply na inexhaustible amount of the elements needed for the synthesis of these gems, and I think the people of old Astran had been able to accomplish it. I examined the little glow-lamp, too, and found it to be simply a crystal bottle filled with the moist crushed leaves of the red plants, which formed a culture of some kind of luminous bacteria.

On the seventh night, when the pale ray of daylight that filtered down into my hiding place was dimmed, Naro burst into the chamber, panting, and wild-eyed with terror.

His crystal sword was gone, his metallic mantle was torn, and blood was falling, drop by drop, from a deep scratch on his arm. He thrust into my hand a tattered scrap of paper, evidently the flyleaf of a book. On it, in na ink that I took at first to be blood, although it was probably the juice of the red plants, the following words were formed in hastily drawn printing characters.

“Winfield, There is no hope. The priests will offer a gift to the Purple Sun. I am the victim. Already I am in the hands of Jorak. I am sorry, for I loved you. It may be that I can give this to Naro, who could take it to you. The Krimlu are coming tonight. Already their lights flicker above the mist. In the morning my brother will take you to the gate, and you may escape. If only it had been one night later we might have all been away together. Farewell.

Melvar.”

No time was to be lost. I had been anticipating something of the kind. The guns were cleaned and loaded. My pack was soon ready. Naro took a part of my equipment. I followed the boy up the stair, with the phrase, “For I loved you,” ringing in my heart.

We reached the top and walked out into the red brush. Beneath the purple starlight the vast fantastic columned halls of Astran were gleaming faintly, and I caught a brief blue flicker from the great machine on the ruby dome.

Suddenly, with a sharp thrill of terror that made me catch my breath, I heard the awful distant whining sigh that grew until it rolled and reverberated through the heavens, and the air seemed alive with its deep intensity. Above the emerald wall I glimpsed the green-tipped needle of crimson that made the sound. It was sweeping through the sky meteor-swift, while the pale blue beam stabbed out at it ineffectually. It passed in na instant, but others came, and soon the sky was lighted with the weird red radiance, and the very mountain top vibrated with the whistling roars. The things swept around and around in a mad confusion of darting flames. They were like moths about a candle.

We passed na amber palace wall and came suddenly upon a great, metal-floored court. Marching across it were a half score of the Astranian men-at-arms, their accoutrements gleaming weirdly in the light of the strange things above. They saw us at once, and charged upon us with a shout. I dropped to my knees. Once my rifle spoke, and I rejoiced at its heavy thrust against my shoulder, and the acrid odor of the smoke. I felt a man again. And the leader of the soldiers fell upon his face.

Melvar Saved

NARO gripped my shoulder and pointed upward.

One of the red things was plunging down, like a great red Zeppelin with a great green light at its forward end, its purple phosphorescent track swirling up behind it. The soldiers forgot us and scattered in mad terror. Naro jerked my arm and in a moment we had tumbled into a copse of the red brush. For a moment the bloody radiance was thrown upon us in na intense flood, and the screaming roar was deafening. A few minutes more, and the thing had flashed up and away. A breath of hot purple mist passed over us. When we got to our feet and crept out of the thicket the soldiers were gone.

Swiftly, Naro led me on, keeping in the shadows of the building, on in the cover of the thickets. Once a man sprang suddenly at us from behind a sapphire pillar, diamond sword drawn.. My pistol exploded in his face and blew his head half off. Naro possessed himself of the dead man's weapons, and we went breathlessly on. Three times, in other parts of the city, we saw the red shapes drop to the ground for a few minutes, and then dart up again, while ever the blue ray played back and forth upon them.

At last we passed between vast ruby columns and stood beneath the huge red dome. Before us lay a great space; fairly, lit with a rosy light from the crystal walls. Around the farther side were seated tier upon tier, thousands of the brilliantly clad people of Astran. In the center of the great floor, resting upon a pedestal, was a globe of shining purple — a sphere of coruscating flame — itself immense, perhaps forty feet in diameter, but insignificant in that colossal hall. Standing at rigid attention, in regular rows about the pedestal were a few score bright-armed soldiers, and as many other erect men in long purple robes. All eyes were fixed on a point in front of the gigantic globe, and hence hidden from where we stood.

We hurried silently across the smooth metal floor, our footsteps drowned in the rushing sounds of the flying things above. We ran around the great purple, sun-sphere of crystal, and came abruptly upon a dramatically terrible scene. Beneath the sphere was na altar of glowing red, with the priests and soldiery all grouped about it. By the altar, kneeling and silent, clad in a filmy green robe, was the beautiful form of Melvar. Just behind her stood a tall hawk-like man, in his hands a great transparent crystal vessel full of a liquid that gleamed like molten silver.

As we came around the sphere he was holding up the vessel and repeating a strange chant in a monotonous monotone. At sight of us he dropped into alarmed silence, with na ugly scowl of hate and fear distorting his harsh features. For a moment he stood

as if paralyzed, then he rushed toward the silent girl as though to empty the contents of the crystal pitcher upon her.

I fired on the instant, and had the luck to shatter the vessel, splashing the shining silvery fluid all over his person. The effect of it was instantaneous and terrible. His purple robe was eaten away and set on fire by the stuff ; his flesh was dyed a deep purple, and partially consumed. He tottered and fell to the floor in a writhing, flaming heap.

In the confusion, and the dazed silence that fell upon the vast assemblage at sight of that horrible thing, Melvar, aroused from her resignation of despair by the report of the pistol, sprang to her feet in incredulous surprise. For a moment she looked wonderingly at us. Then she turned and shouted a few strange and impressive words at the priests. Her white arms swept up in a curious gesture.

Then she turned and sped toward us. We started running back the way we had come. The dramatic fall of Jorak, and the evident terror that Melvar's courageous and timely words, whatever they had been, had inspired, served to hold the Astranians motionless until we had traversed the better part of the distance to the columns. But then they started after us en masse. I dropped to my knees at the columns and began firing steadily with the rifle. They fell, sometimes two or three at a shot, but still they charged on, and their number was overwhelming.

Then, outside, there was a sudden louder shrieking roar. A flood of red light poured through the columns, and there was a terrific crash upon the dome. Dense clouds of hot purple vapor poured into the vast room. One of the flying lights had landed upon the roof. The charging throng behind us stopped and ran about in confusion. We darted out through the purple clouds and ran for the shadow of the nearest building. We kept close by the mighty walls until we reached the gate. Daring the terrors of the night, we ran out and down the narrow trail. By dawn we were several miles from Astran in the direction of the shining lake.

CHAPTER VII – The Silver Lake

AT the coming of day we were walking over a gently rolling scarlet plain, scattered with gigantic solitary boulders, that sloped gradually down to the Silver Lake. The lake lay flat and argent white, clad in all the ominous mystery of that strange world, calling, beckoning us on, challenging us to learn the secret of the farthest bank of purple fog, with a grim warning of the doom that might await us. The red fern-like sprays waved

gently in the breeze, and the vivid, tiny white flowers seemed to sparkle with a million glancing rays, like frost in the sunshine; but the deep intensity of the red color lent a weird and unpleasant suggestion of blood. Beyond the Silver Lake, low hills rose, faint and mysterious in the purple haze.

Melvar walked beside me when the way was smooth enough; she was talking vivaciously. She had a keen sense of humor and a lively wit. She seemed to have an almost childishly perfect faith in my power and that of my guns — but I was far from feeling confident.

At sunrise we stopped by a little pool of clear water, drank, and made a meal of the abundant yellow fruit. Astran, with the scintillating fires kindled again in its jeweled towers by the rising sun, lay far behind and above us. When we had finished eating, Melvar stood looking for a long moment at its glorious sparkling light. She murmured a few words beneath her breath, in the Astranian tongue, and turned again toward the Silver Lake.

In two hours we came to the shore of the great lake. The red scrub grew up to the brink of a bluff a dozen feet high. Below was a broad, bare sandy beach, with the gleaming waves, quicksilver white, rolling on it two hundred yards away. For a few minutes we stood at the edge of the cliff, in the fringe of crimson brush, and let our eyes wander over the vast flat desert of flowing argent fire. We peered at the misty red hills beyond, trying to penetrate their mysteries, and to read what lay behind them. Then we scrambled down on the hard white sand. Naro grasped his weapon and looked up and down the beach.

“It is along the shore of the Silver Lake,” Melvar said, “that the Purple Ones are most frequently found.”

“The Purple Ones, again!” I cried. “What are they — decorated rattlesnakes?” Then, with a sickening sensation of terror, I remembered the horrible, half-human purple corpse that I had seen the soldiers bringing into Astran. “Are the Purple Ones men?”

“In form, they are men and women” Melvar said, “but they dwell alone in the thickets like beasts. All of them, are old and hideous. They are savage, and they have the strength each of many men. Our soldiers must always hunt them, and fight them to the death.

A single man, even though armed, could do nothing against one of them, for they are terribly strong, and they fight like demons. Their country is not known, and no children of their kind are ever found. The priests say that they are of a race of dwarfs that dwell beneath the Silver Lake.” Here was another of the baffling mysteries of this strange

world. In fact, I was coming upon unpleasant mysteries much faster than I could comfortably stomach them. Lone, purple, savage animals, in the form of emaciated humans, who prowled about the country like wolves, and like wolves were hunted down by the Astranians! Again I shuddered at the memory of the limp purple corpse the soldiers had carried, and. With a strange chill of the heart, I remembered the human footprints that had been left where my ponies were taken in the desert, and of the eerie, insane laughter that I had heard, or thought I heard, above the whistling roar.

My thoughts ended with the construction of a mad hypothesis of a race of purple folk who lived beyond the Silver Lake, who were accustomed to make slave raids on the white's in torpedo-shaped airships, and who made a practise of releasing, or turning out, the superannuated ones of their kind to prey on the people of the crystal city. It seemed, in fact, quite plausible at the time, but I was far from the hideous truth. I could see no reason, if one race could attain a civilization high enough to synthetize diamonds for building stone, why another might not be able to build ships as marvelous as the red torpedoes. But my reason rebelled at the acceptance of the ideas of demonic and supernatural horrors my emotional self tried to force upon it.

Touch of the Metal

PRESENTLY I roused myself and led the way down the white waves. My companions held back nervously and warned me not to touch it, or I would die as Jorak had done. But I succeeded in filling a test tube with the stuff. It was not transparent. It was white, gleaming, metallic, like mercury, or molten silver. I carried it back up to the bluff and set about examining it, while Naro stood guard, and Melvar watched me. She asked innumerable questions, concerning not only the operation in hand, but on such subjects as the appearance of a cat, and Fifth Avenue styles of ladies' garments. Upon which (the latter subject), however, I was lamentably ignorant. And so often did I pause, to answer her questions, to laugh at the naive quaintness of her phrases, or to let my eyes rest on her charming face, that the attempted analysis of the metal did not progress with any remarkable celerity.

The silver liquid was very mobile and very light, having a specific gravity of only .25, or not even four times that of liquid hydrogen, which is .07. It was extremely corrosive. Tiny bits of wood or paper were entirely consumed on contact with it, with the liberation, apparently, of carbon dioxide and water vapor, and a dense purple gas that I could not identify. That suggested, of course, that the stuff contained oxygen, but as to

how much, or in what combination, I had no idea. A drop of it on a larger piece of paper set it afire. I found, too, when testing the electrolytic qualities of the liquid, that when I introduced into it a copper and a silver coin, electrically connected, that the stuff was rapidly decomposed into the purple vapor, with the generation of a powerful current. But the metal seemed not affected at all. That was another puzzling result. My experiments, of course, were comparatively crude, and when I had gone as far as I could, I really knew little more about the silver liquid than in the beginning.

Despite Melvar's warding, and my own precautions, I splashed a drop of it on my arm. She cried out in horror, and I saw that a splotch of purple was spreading like a thin film over the skin. There was no pain, but the muscles of the arm were seized with sudden and uncontrollable convulsions. Melvar tried to wash the stain off with water from my canteen. In na hour the color had faded, though the limb was still sore and painful.

By that time, the purple disc of the sun was sinking low, and we took thought of how to spend the night. Naro climbed up on the plain to gather a few of the fruits for our supper, and we found' a little cave in the bluff that seemed a good place of shelter. I gathered na armful of the red brush and made a fire.

The leaves burned fiercely, crackling as if they contained oil. The fire produced a great volume of acrid black smoke. Combustion waS greatly accelerated on account of the increased atmospheric pressure. Here, many thousand feet below sea level. Melvar and Naro were intensely interested in the performance, although they had seen Austen light a fire while he was in the city.

Melvar slept in the cavern, and Naro and I took turns at standing guard at the entrance. The darting pencils of crimson were abroad again, but they passed far overhead, and we heard the sounds of their passage only as vast and distant sighs. In the morning we rose early, and clambered back up the cliffs. I was in rather a puzzling situation. Clearly my duty was to get Austen's equipment to him as' quickly as possible, but I liked neither to desert Melvar and her brother, nor to let them accompany me into the unknown perils of the region beyond. But the latter course seemed the best, and they were ready enough to go with me anywhere.

Land of Madness

HAVING retraced our course of the day before for perhaps a mile, in order to get upon the. Upland, we set out for the north. The sun was just rising above the black rim when Naro shouted and pointed at the mist-clad red hills beyond the Silver Lake. At first

I looked in vain; then I caught a faint flicker of amber light, pulsing up through the purple air.

Abruptly a vast mellow golden beam of light sprang from behind the distant scarlet hills and spread up toward the zenith in a deep yellow flood. It seemed to vibrate, to throb with incredibly rapid fluctuations. Suddenly, bright swift-changing formless shapes of green and red flared up within it, shot up the beam, and vanished. The radiance dimmed and died. I could see nothing, but somehow I felt that an invisible beam of vibrant force was still pouring up into the sky. Here was another manifestation of the unknown power beyond the sea. The beam had come. So far as visibility was concerned, it was gone. What had been its meaning, its purpose?

Beyond the Silver Lake, low cliffs rose above a broad sandy beach, faintly veiled by the purple mist. The red hills were fainter still above them, and the thicker pall of purple haze that hung over the hidden place beyond, stood out distinctly against the distant, steep black wall that threw his jagged crags to the sky so far above. Out of that vale of mystery the ray had leapt — and died. Or had it merely faded, and was now, invisible... pulsing still?

All seemed as it had been before, but from the attitude of my companions I knew there was more to come. They were gazing up into the sun-bright void above and waiting expectantly.

Then I saw, far, far above, growing gradually brighter against the sky, as if it were being projected there by a great magic lantern behind the hills, an upright bar of silver haze. Slowly it grew brighter and its outlines sharper until it looked like a vertical bar of silver metal in the sky — inconceivably huge. The length of the bar must have been miles, its diameter, many hundreds of yards. It hung still in the heavens, neither rising nor falling. Here was the display, indeed, of alien science and power!

Presently I recovered from my first wonder, and became conscious that the blue eyes of Melvar were upon me quite as much as on the astonishing thing in the sky. "Melvar, have you seen it before?" I asked. "Is it real — natural? Is it made by man?" I found to my surprise that my voice was odd and quavery. I had not realized the intensity of my nervous strain. I waited eagerly for the reassurance that she could not give.

"It comes often," she replied. "Every day for many months of the year. The priests say that it is the evil goddess of the under-earth, who loves the Purple Sun and flies to the sky to meet him. But the Sun goes on unheeding, and the goddess cries silver tears until her Lord is gone from the sky. But there is yet more to see."

I looked up again and saw that a faint colored mist was gathering about the bar. It grew brighter, condensed, seemed drawn into swirling rings by a sort of magnetic attraction. And the iridescent mist-rings swam about the bar, moved ever faster until they were whirling madly. Their coruscating shapes grew brighter, plainer, until they were vivid, spinning flames of color in the sunshine. I noticed that the red was about the center of the silver bar, and that the bands of color above and below ran regularly to the other end of the spectrum, with rings of violet at the bottom and at the top. During all this time I heard no sound. It was as still as death.

Still the color-rings spun and changed, growing ever brighter and sharper edged. The red band grew larger about the center, until its diameter was the length of the cylinder. It gleamed with a lurid scarlet light. Below and above were spinning, burning circles of orange, yellow, green, and blue, each thinner than the one next nearer the center, and of smaller diameter. And the violet rings had shrunk to great globes of violet fire, shining with painful intensity.

Indeed, as Melvar had said, there had been more to see. The thing was so utterly strange, so utterly inexplicable, that I was grasped in a paralysis of unfamiliar terror, my breath choked off and my heart beating wild with fear, staring straight at it. It was so definitely directed by intelligence that I felt it must spring from a weird and awful mind. Indeed, it seemed that I felt the power of a vast and alien will stealing over me, seizing command of me, making me the slave of itself. I struggled against it. I clenched my hands and knotted my muscles with the intensity of my resistance to the spell. Wheeling sparks of red fire swam before my eyes.

Then my efforts weakened. I could hold out no longer. The alien will had won. Reason and feeling and love flowed away and left me as cold and cruel as a rock in a stormy, wintry coast—a savage, inhuman animal. Care had left me. My soul had lost her throne. I laughed. A wild, unearthly sound it was, like that I had heard as I lay beneath the tent beyond the barrier.

I whirled around fiercely, but a firm arresting hand was laid on my shoulder. From afar off, deep blue eyes looked into mine—eyes that were cool and sane and brave. They shone through the red curtains of insanity in my brain. They broke the spell of fear.

Suddenly I was very weak, and trembling and sick. Melvar's lithe arms were close about me. Her throbbing heart was close to mine. And in her dark, warm blue eyes, so close to mine, were sympathy, and tenderness, and love. She was human; she was real. I knew that her love would shield me from these terrors. I smiled at her, and sank down

weakly in the red brush. But she had saved my mind. I had wandered on the brink of the fearful insanity of terror, and she had brought me back.

I looked from her sweet face, so full of anxious concern to the thing in the sky. But now it seemed remote, unreal, and I gazed at it with weak indifference. Presently I saw that the whole thing was beginning to sink as though a weight were being accumulated upon it. Suddenly na immense gleaming globule of silver fell from the lower violet globe and dropped straight for the Silver Lake, while the weird form of lights that had made it floated back to its former elevation. The great shining sphere fell and struck the white lake with a deafening roar, sending out great concentric waves in all directions. The amazing thing sank again, released a second huge drop, and rose. The process was repeated again and again, the interval being, by my watch, about 3 minutes, 15.2 seconds. All day it went on, with the great waves washing up the bluffs above the beach, and before night the level of the Silver Lake stood perceptibly higher.

Here was the mystery of the origin of the Silver Lake explained, but by a phenomenon far more inexplicable than the sea itself. In vain I tried to account for it in some rational way, or to assign some natural cause for the thing. My mind could hardly grasp it. It was almost unbelievable, even as I looked upon it. My reason would not admit that such a thing could be in a rational world.

CHAPTER VIII – Stalked by the Purple Beast

SO weak was I after that terrible experience that it was noon before I felt able to go on. The thing, as I have said, continued to hang in the sky all day, and to drop regularly its burden of the silver liquid. But presently I became accustomed to it, and realized that it threatened us with no immediate danger.

After a light lunch of the yellow fruit, and a deep draught of water from a little stream that seemed almost parallel to our route of march for a mile or two, we retired to the higher ground where the scrub was not so dense as in the bottom of the valley, and set out for the north again. Still I was feeling mentally limp — dully indifferent to what was passing about — and physically exhausted as well. I was not as much on my guard against the weird perils of the place as I should have been.

Several times Naro stopped and listened, declaring that something was following us, keeping in the cover of waist-high brush in the bottom of the little valley along the side of which we were traveling. But I could hear nothing. Melvar, for once, had ceased her eager interrogation, and was entertaining me with the legendary account of the past

great heroes of Astran. She sang me a few passages from the epic in her native tongue. Her voice was clear and pure and very beautiful. And though the words were strange to me, their sound was noble and suggestive, and there was a powerful, compelling rhythm in the lines. She translated the story into English. It was about such na epic poem as might have been expected, dealing with the adventures of na immortal hero, who had once conquered the Purple Ones, set up the vast palaces of Astran, and at last lost his life on na expedition across the Silver Lake to battle the Krimlu.

Suddenly her sweet voice was interrupted by a low, tense cry from Naro, who had fiercely gripped my arm. I turned in time to see a weird figure, gnarled and stooped, with long white hair, slink swiftly and furtively from a great rock to the shelter of the red brush. Squat and bent as it was, there was no mistaking that it was human in shape, and that the skin was purple.

In the dull apathy in which I was sunken, I could not realize the danger. "I guess a rifle bullet will fix it," I said.

"The Purple Ones have more power than you know," cried Melvar. "Let us try to get on more open ground before it attacks. Then it will have to leave its cover."

So we turned and ran away from the stream, to a rocky hillside, where the red scrub grew low and scant. As we ran I heard a crashing behind us. Once I turned quickly, and raised my rifle. The strange figure darted abruptly into view, and I fired on the instant. I think I hit it, for it spun around quickly, and fell to the ground. But in a moment it was up, and running toward us with na agility that was incredible, springing over the red brush in great bounds, with a motion more like that of a monstrous hopping insect than of a human being. His white hair was flying in wild disorder, his shrunken limbs plainly flashing purple. And a terrible sound came from it as it bounded along—not a scream of rage or of pain, but a weird uncanny laugh, that rang strangely over the red plain, and somehow made us pause in our race, and tremble with alien terror.

A Narrow Escape

BUT we broke the icy fingers of fear that gripped our hearts, and ran on until we reached a great flat rock that lay at the upper edge of the bare space, in the edge of the thickets again. I lifted Melvar in my arms until she could reach the top and scramble up. Then I looked back and saw the purple man leaping across the clearing with incredible speed, not two hundred yards away.

Then Naro and I got up on that rock—I have never been able to remember just how we did it.

I dropped to my knees, seized the rifle that I had pushed up before me, and began to pump lead at the beast as fast as I could work the bolt. The recoils of the gun seemed almost a steady thrust. I heard the bullets thud into the purple body. I saw it checked or driven back by the impacts. One bullet took it off its balance and it fell. But in a moment it was rating on again, empowered by superhuman energy.

When my rifle was empty it was not twenty feet, away. One arm was gone. One side of the body was fearfully torn. The purple face was a hideous mangled thing. It did not bleed, but the wounds were covered with a purple viscous slime. One of the eyes was gone, and the other glared at us with a wild red light. Anything of ordinary life must long since have been dead. But it gathered itself, and leapt for the top of the boulder.

On the day before I had showed Melvar how to use my guns, merely by way of proof that there was nothing supernatural in the working of the weapon that had slain so many of the Astranians in the temple. Now I pushed one of the pistols toward, her. She was standing there motionless, calmly, even. There was no panic in her face, and I knew that she would have the courage to use the weapon to save herself from the terrible brute, if things came to the worst. She smiled at me, even as she picked up the gun. Then, looking at the safety, she gripped it in a business-like way.

As the purple monster sprang upon the boulder, I emptied my automatic into it. Great wounds were torn in the dark flesh, and half the face was shot away, but the thing seemed immune to death by ordinary means. As the last shot was -fired it stood before us on the rock, a terrible mangled thing, the red eye blazing with demonic inhumanity.

Naro sprang out before me, his crystal sword drawn high. As the beast sprang at him, he cut at it with a mighty sweep of the razor-edged weapon. But the stroke, which would have decapitated na ordinary human, was parried by a terrific blow of the claw-like hand of the thing, and the boy was sent spinning back against me. We fell together on the rock.

Then it hurled itself toward Melvar. It all happened in the briefest of moments, before I could even begin to rise. She swung up the automatic with a quick, sure, graceful movement. She was like a beautiful goddess of battle, with blue eyes shining brightly, and golden hair gleaming in the sun. Again that mad laugh was ringing out, with a choking sob in it, for the thing's vocal organs were injured. It leapt at her, its lacerated limbs working like machines. Calmly she stood, with automatic raised. The muzzle of the gun

was not na inch from the throat of the beast when she fired. The strange head was blown completely off the body, and fell rolling and bouncing to the red brush below. The body collapsed, writhing and convulsed. It was not quiet for many minutes.

The girl dropped the gun, suddenly trembling, and threw herself into my arms, sobbing uncontrollably. Her courage and coolness had saved us all, and I admit that I was quite as much unstrung as she after the danger had passed. What a wonderful being she was!

The Red Ship

IT was so late in the day, and we were so completely exhausted that we decided to go no farther. Naro was not hurt, save for a few scratches; and I suppose he was the least excited of the three. In a few minutes he threw the quivering purple body off the boulder and carried it and the head back across the clearing to dispose of them. When he returned we found na overhanging shelf on the north side of the boulder that would afford some shelter from the flying lights. We gathered some of the yellow fruit for supper, cleaned and reloaded the weapons, and prepared to spend the night there.

Naro called me aside and showed me a curious, much-worn silver bracelet, with a singular design upon it. He told me, in his imperfect English, that it had belonged to his father, who had been taken by the flying lights many years before. That was a curious development. It showed that there was some connection between the dreaded Purple Ones, and the terrible, pillaging red lights. But the full significance of it did not dawn upon me until later.

By that time I was in a measure accustomed to the passage of the rushing, whistling needles of crimson fire, and during the first part of the night I was able to sleep; while Naro sat up to keep watch. At midnight he awakened me, and we changed places. The sky was crossed and recrossed by the faint and flickering tracks of red, and the night was weirdly lit by the torpedo-shapes of scarlet flame that sped upon them. With a fatuous sense of security, I was leaning back against the boulder, smoking my pipe and caressing the cold metal of the rifle in my hand, dreaming of what Melvar and I might do if ever we were to emerge into the world alive.

The red thing was upon me before I knew it. The light of my pipe must have been visible to it. In my accursed thoughtlessness, that danger had never occurred to me. The thing came plunging down, flooding the landscape with its lurid crimson radiance, while the earth vibrated to its whistling, hissing scream. There was no need to waken my

companions for they sprang to their feet in alarm! We all cowered back against the rock in the hope of escaping observation. But the thing had already seen us.

I put my arm about. The warm, throbbing body of Melvar, and drew her close to my breast. Her own cool white hand grasped mine as silently we waited.

The red object came down swiftly, paused just above the crimson thickets before us, then settled deliberately to earth. It was the first opportunity I had had for a close examination of these things. The shape was plainly cylindrical, tapering toward the ends. It was perhaps ten feet in diameter, and a hundred long. Set on the forward end was a bright green globe, perhaps three feet in diameter.

A clump of brush about the end of the cylinder burst into flame. As the bright crimson hue began to dull, I grasped suddenly the fact that the red color was due to the red heat generated by friction with the air, which was very great at the meteor pace the thing attained. It lay there, not fifty yards away, with the fire blazing and crackling about the end on our right, and eating its way into the thickets. The green sphere on the other end seemed to stare at us like a great intent eye. The red color slowly, faded. Suddenly Melvar gripped my arm.

“Why wait?” she whispered. “Perhaps it does not see us after all. Let us slip around the boulder.”

But on the instant we moved a great oval space swung out of the side of the cylinder. We saw that the door and walls were of a bluish white metal, and were very thick. It was very dark inside. A blood-congealing, eerie laugh sounded out of that darkness, and I shuddered. Quickly five human-like figures leaped one by one out of the oval doorway. With heart-chilling fear, I saw, by the -flickering light of the burning thicket, that long white hair hanging about faces wrinkled and hideously aged, with toothless gums, red glaring eyes, and skin that was purple. Without a moment’s hesitation, the five naked monsters rushed down upon us.

The fire was fast blazing higher and burning rapidly into the brush between us and the cylinder, and we could see the purple beasts quite plainly in its light. And they were hideous to look upon. They came toward us with monstrous, springing bounds, actuated by some extraordinary force. Their muscles must have been far stronger than those of men, perhaps as strongly constructed as those of insects. Or, since muscular force depends on the intensity of nerve currents, perhaps their nerves were extraordinarily excited. And there was something insect-like in the way life had lingered in the body of the one we had killed, when it had already many wounds that should have been mortal.

I leveled my rifle, drew a bead on the neck of the foremost one, and fired. I must have had the luck to shatter the bones, for the head dropped limply to the side. The thing stopped abruptly, groping blindly about with its talon-like fingers. It seemed very strange that it did not fall. In a ruinstant one of the others ran close by it. The crippled monster sprang savagely at the other, and in a moment they were writhing, and struggling in the brush, tearing at one another with tiger-like ferocity. The others passed by them for a moment, while I finished emptying the rifle, without visible results.

Saved by Fire

BY that time the crackle of the swiftly spreading fire had grown to a dull roar. It swept fast across the brush, red flames flaring high, and dense smoke rolling up into the night. The purple beasts did not appear to see it. They made no effort to avoid the flames. Were they invulnerable to fire? Or was fire merely unknown to them as to the people of Astran?

The three rushed straight on toward us, disregarding the rushing wall of flame not a dozen yards to the right of them. I kept firing madly. The leg of one went limp, but he leapt on with scarcely diminished speed, laughing terribly, with the white hair flying about the awful face, and the purple limbs moving frenziedly. The flames rushed over the fallen two and hid them. In another instant the curtain of fire had rolled over the others, and even the ship was hidden from our view.

Suddenly I realized that we were in quite as much danger from the fire as from the monsters. Already we were shrinking from the hot wind that blew before the flames, and half choked by the acrid fumes. For the second time we made a mad retreat to the top of the boulder, and lay flat. I heard a terrible laugh from the flames, and in a moment one of the things dashed out. His hair was gone, and the purple flesh burnt black. I shot as it showed itself, and it fell. In another instant the flames had raced over it again. None of the others appeared.

We lay on the rock for several minutes, gasping in the cooler air that lingered near its surface. For a time the heat was stifling, but the scanty vegetation had burned off quickly, and soon a cool breeze came up from the south and lifted the smoke. We saw that the cylinder still lay where it had been, although the heavy body was closed. The green light still shone in the forward end. About it the earth lay black and smoking, and a low line of flame lay below the pall of smoke in a great ring all about us. Between us and the ship I saw in the darkness the black shadows that were the five dead beasts.

I was just beginning to wonder if all the crew of the ship were dead, so that we might enter and examine it, when the great oval door in the side swung open again, and something sprang out of it into the night. I heard a strange hissing, and a clatter of metal. In the semi-darkness I could see nothing plainly, but there was a floating shape of greenish mist, with a vague form beneath. I strained my eyes to try to distinguish its shape, while it stood motionless.

Abruptly a narrow, intensely bright beam of orange light shot out of it and impinged upon the rock. There was a dull thud from the rock, and the ray was dead in a moment. But the granite where it had struck was cut away—obliterated! The beam had shone straight through the boulder, carrying away, or resolving into primary electrons, the matter on which it had struck! The smooth edges of the cut were glowing with a soft violet radiance.

My rifle was at hand, and on recovering from my surprise, I fired. I aimed just below the greenish patch. Something must have been exploded by the bullet, for there was a vivid flash of white fire, and a loud, sharp report. The spot of, green was visible no longer, and we saw no motion about the cylinder. At the time I had no idea what it was that I had shot. I supposed that it had been another of the purple beasts armed with a strange ray-weapon. I imagined that the bullet had struck the weapon and caused na explosion.

CHAPTER IX – The Battle in the Mist

FOR perhaps na hour, we sat there on the rock. As soon as the smoke cleared, we could see the crimson needles flying high upon their vague red tracks, and we watched them with a sort of hypnotic fascination, dreading. The moment when one of them would land to investigate the fate of the ship that lay silent and presumably empty before us. The ground was still too hot for us to walk upon, and we felt the uselessness of attempting to escape on foot, even if it had already cooled. With a feeling of resigned and hopeless horror, we saw one of the crimson pencils circle lower about the place, then disappear in the direction of its lair beyond the Silver Lake.

Even as the whistling roar of its passage was rolling down upon us, Melvar spoke. How I admire the courage and indomitable resourcefulness of the girl. When I was hopelessly lost in despair, feeling all the desolation of this region and the infinite remoteness of the world of men, her pure rich voice and the warm living touch of her hand brought new courage to me.

“The Krimlu are coming,” she cried. “There is no use to try to fight them, or to try to outrun them. But that ship must be empty. The walls are metal and strong. Perhaps they could not open it.”

While there were several things about the proposition that were not very attractive, it seemed our best resource; and, besides, I had a keen desire to see the interior of the thing. We gathered up our equipment, climbed off the boulder, and hurried over to the cylinder. I was possessed by a haunting fear that we would find some thing hideous awaiting us, but the bright pencil of light from my pocket lamp revealed no living being in the long interior, nor could I find even a trace of the green patch that had blown up in front of the door. We scrambled through the opening without difficulty and I turned a handle that swung the heavy door shut and evidently locked it.

Then I set about examining the mechanism, for I had na intense curiosity about the propulsive force that enabled the vessel to attain a speed that must have reached thousands of miles per hour. In one end were rows of long cylinders of a transparent substance, evidently filled with the metallic fluid from the Silver Lake. Pipes ran from them to a complex mechanism in the rear end of the ship, from which heavy conduits ran all over the inside of the metal hull. While my understanding of it all was far from complete, I was able to verify a previous idea—that the strange vessels were driven by use of the rocket principle. It seems that the silver fluid was decomposed in the machine, and that the purple gas it formed, at a very high temperature was forced out through the various tubes at a terrific velocity, propelling the ship by its reaction. The whistling roar of the things in motion was, of course, the sound of the escaping gas, and the red-purple tracks were merely the expelled gas hanging in the air.

The green globe in the forward end may have been the objective lens for a marvelous periscope. At any rate the walls of the forward part of the shell seemed transparent. And the periscope must have utilized infra-red rays, for the scene about us seemed much brighter than it, in reality, was. We could see very plainly the burned plain and the granite rock, and once, through a rift in the clouds of smoke that were rising all about, I caught a glimpse of the gleaming city of Astran, high above us in the west.

I noticed a slender lever, with a corrugated disc at the top, rising out of the floor in the bow of the ship. It occurred to me that it was the control lever. I took hold of it and gingerly pushed it back. Great jets of purple gas rushed past the transparent walls about us, and the ship slid backward on the ground. The sensation of motion was most alarming. The illusion of the transparency of the bow of the ship was so perfect that it seemed almost

as if we were hanging in space a few feet in front of the mouth of na open tube. It was impossible for me to realize that I was surrounded by solid walls of metal, until I touched them. I think the wonderful telescope worked on much the same principle as television apparatus—that is, that the rays of light were picked up, converted into electrical impulses, amplified, and then projected on the metal wall, which served as a screen.

(To be concluded)