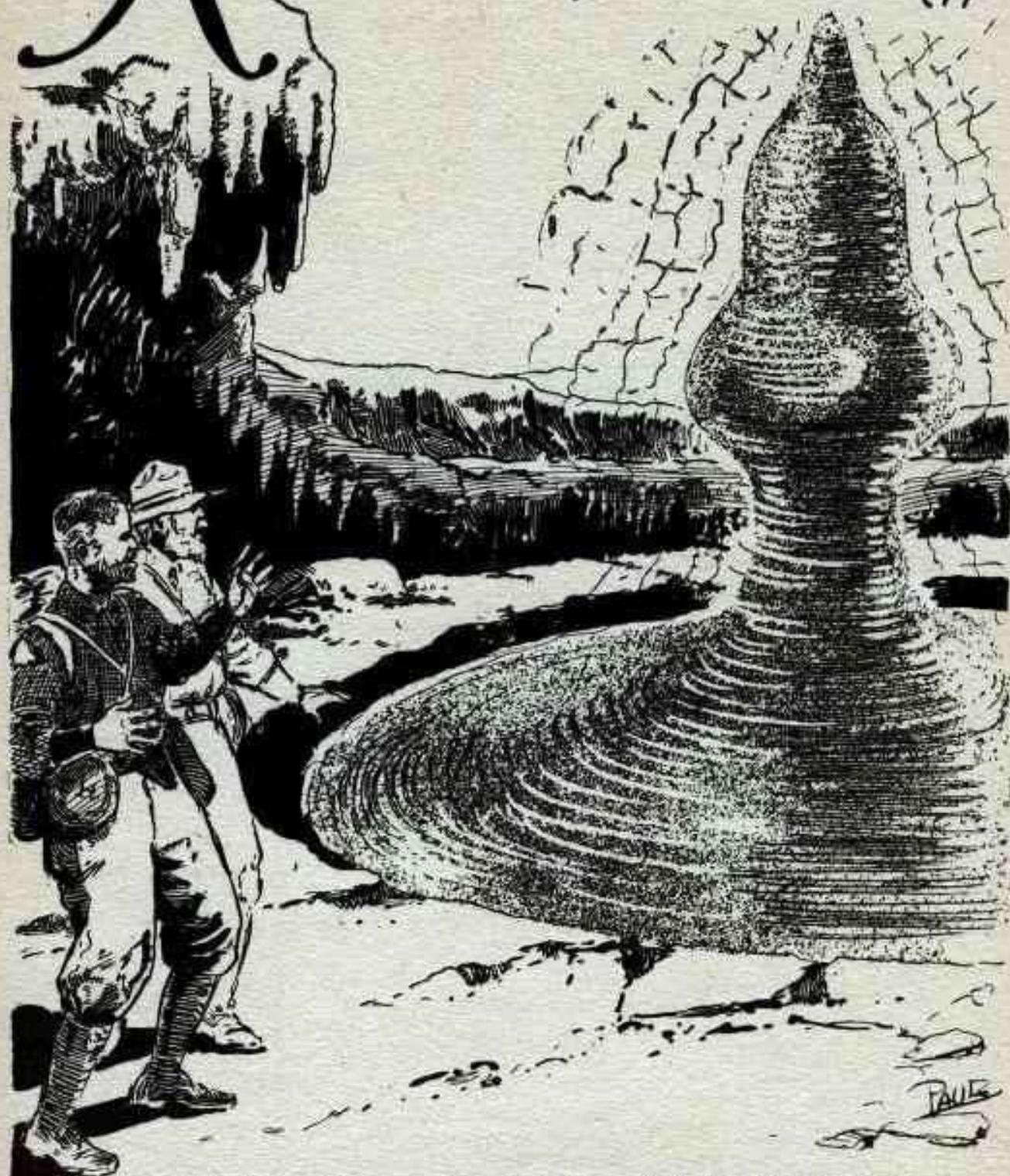


The Radium Pool

by
Ed. Earl Repp



Gradually the high-pitched scream became a steady hum. Under the whirling pressure of the column, the sphere was changing slowly into a cylindrical shape. I stared with unbelief. Surely my brain was playing pranks.



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CHAPTER I - A Choice Assignment

AT my little desk tucked away in the corner of the editorial rooms of the Outlander, behind the broad, paper-littered table of the city editor, I sat praying for something to happen. Anything would do that would break the spell of semi-consciousness that had captured me during a lull in city news. I had cleared off my desk, inserted a new ribbon in the typewriter, winked a couple of times at the switchboard operator, and fell into a delightful doze. As star reporter for the Outlander I felt that I had some privileges and, under the conditions, a little snooze would not imperil my position, providing I did my snoozing where the city editor would have to yelp only once to have me at his side. Earlier in the day I had interviewed the District Attorney without any startling results. I had gone so far as to visit the Grand Jury impanelled to investigate charges of bribery in the city administration, but failed to learn the results of their probe. Then I had returned to the office to await anything that might come in. Now, under the pall of a quiet and none too cool afternoon, even the city editor was fighting to keep awake.

As I dozed, I dreamed of visiting the glacier at Bishop. Then I floated down to Rio de Janeiro. From there, all in a period of perhaps several quiet minutes, I traveled to San Juan Capistrano where I found that the old Bells of San Juan Mission were ringing loudly for the first time in a half century. I awoke with a start. The telephone on the city desk was jangling like a fire-bell.

I sat dazed for an instant. Then my brain cleared from its inertia and I sat back expecting something to happen. I heard the City Editor slam down the receiver. His swivel chair squeaked as he spun around.

“Dowell!” he called, lustily.

“Yes sir!” I answered, rubbing my bleary eyes.

“Oh, I see you snapped out of it, eh ? I was figuring to have the janitor bring you a cot to sleep on—or send you to a hotel for a rest, or—”

“Or tell me to take a vacation, huh?” I returned. “This is a helluva day!”

The City Editor grinned.

“Where’d yuh like to go, Dowell?” he asked.

“North Pole, boss! Or maybe up to Bishop to sleep in one of those glacial caves they rave so much about. Ought to be cool there.”

“That’s a good one on you, Dowell. But I am going to give you a little vacation in appreciation of your commendable work of late. I’m mighty sorry I can’t let you go to the North Pole or to Bishop either. You’re going to Death Valley!”

“I’m what!”

“I said you leave for Death Valley and I don’t mean in December either !”

“That’s a fine—oh well, it might be worse!”

“It could be, but it isn’t. I gotta send you out because you seem to be the only reporter on the staff who understands scientific work. You like geology, archaeology, anthropology and so on. You ought to be happy at a chance to work with a real scientist. You dash out to the Southland Institute of Technology and make arrangements with Professor Bloch to accompany him to Death Valley. Professor Bloch phoned in—yes, while you were Sleepin’ like the original babe in the woods—and invited us to send a reporter out to cover his reconnaissance of some important human fossils reported found in the Valley. He’ll be gone several days, will pay all expenses and you ought to learn something. It’ll be a feather in your hat if you bring in a corking scientific yarn for the Outstander Syndicate—and don’t forget the bonus offered for the best story of the month.”

“But its quite out of the ordinary to send the star reporter out on a goose chase, boss,” I parried, hoping that he’d change his mind.

“It is, but not when a man like Professor Bloch asks for the star hand on this journal. You know he has always suspected that there’s more in Death Valley than anybody ever learned. Who knows—he might make the greatest discovery ever as regards human development in America ! I’m doing you a favor, Dowell, but you don’t seem to appreciate it! I’d go myself if I wasn’t tied down to this desk. Now get the hell out of here and remember that if a man bites a dog—that’s news. And don’t try to make a monkey out of this paper, either!”

“Okay, general! I’ll wire you from Barstow on the way back so you can reserve a room for memdown in the ice house. And thanks for the—er—the vacation!”

“Don’t mention it, Dowell!” the City Editor laughed. “Have a hot time!”

A Rescue

THE trip to Death Valley was uneventful. We camped at what Professor Bloch believed to be the lost Mesquite Springs. The sun had just settled over the edge of the Fuqerals and the pack animals which we had picked up at Stovepipe Wells were munching barley at the tail of the buck-board when the professor beheld something bobbing about among the sand dunes. The object was too far away to make certain with the naked eye whether it was a man or an animal. Professor Bloch got out his field glasses and discovered that it was a man.

We watched him for several minutes and during that time he fell seven times. He was staggering in circles and appeared to move only because some hidden power forced him to. Presently he fell again and this time he lay still. So Professor Bloch saddled a burro and rode out to get him. I stood up on the tail of the buckboard and watched the silent drama.

Coyotes had followed the stumbling man patiently waiting for him to die. The professor rode to a spot where they were squatted on their hunkers, circled a small area and

found his man. He brought him back to the camp, and after we washed the alkali and sand ticks from his eyes we gave him water. When it was safe enough for him to have all the water he wanted, we gave him food,mafter which he said his name was of no consequence but he had been foreman of the Panamint Mining Company over Balch way. Hysterically he told us that he had lost his partner, interspersing his wordsmwith fragments of a tale that made Professor Bloch's strong brows knit together and his eyes flash.

“He's gone—he'll never see this world again I” the man interrupted when I asked him if it were not too late for us to help his partner.

He inquired if by any chance we had ever heard of his partner, “Driftin'” Sands. I told him that I had, for I wanted the story which seemed to lie hazily in the back of his befuddled brain.

“Well!” he said, hysterically, “He's found his sweetheart, Allie Lane! We followed the trail together and we found her way over in hell across the Manalava plain. You can see it way over there in hell—it's the red streak table land off to the southeast. For more than forty years. Sands had been Driftin' over the deserts searching for her. At last they are together!”

“Sands and I struck out for the Manalava Plain. Our water gave out. We were looking for a lost mine and Sands' girl!”

The prospector took a long pull at the canteen. Professor Bloch and I squatted in the sand beside our tiny cook fire. The mine foreman pointed with trembling hand, towards the southeast where the vague and sinister outlines of a mountain range loomed mysteriously in the ghostly desert dusk.

“That's a terrible place!” he groaned. “We found a band of heathens there where not even a sidewinder would dare to venture. That flat, above all else in these deserts, is the hottest place this side of hell! And the heathens? Waugh!—”

Professor Bloch sat bolt upright and eyed the prospector whose withered, leather-like visage loomed like a spectre in the glare of the camp-fire. His face glowed with a ghostly tint of greenish phosphorescence—like the radium dobed face of a glowing watch-dial!

“Pardon my interruption, old man.” Professor Bloch said, apologetically. “Did I understand you to say that strange human beings exist on the Manalava Plain?”

“A band of heathens, yes!” replied the prospector with a shudder. They ain’t human, they’re frog-faced beasts about seven feet tall, with funny long arms, long legs and big heads! We stumbled on them accidentally and they made us prisoners! God help Driftin’ Sands and Allie Lane!”

“Did you escape?” I inquired, rather disdainfully, for I was figuring that the prospector suffered from the heat. I glanced over him. His hands now were steady but his lips trembled a trifle. He shook his head slowly and closed his eyes. I accepted the movement as an attempt to shut out some terrible vision from his sun-scorched brain.

“Yes, young fellow, I got away! But only because I was left for dead! And I come mighty close to passing on, too. I got a family over at Balch, and kids that’s been needin’ me, otherwise I couldn’t have made it here!” he answered, heatedly, taking offense at my doubting attitude.

“I always suspected that a race of peculiar people existed out this way,” Professor Bloch put in. “This account does not startle me in the least. In fact, my associate, Dr. Jorg Jamesson, recovered some strange and almost human remains in this neighborhood that gave rise to startling revelations. Lately our astronomers have noticed peculiar atmospheric conditions over Death Valley that seemed, to indicate some tremendous radioactive force emanating from the earth’s surface!”

“If I remember right,” the prospector commented, “Sands and I met your Dr. Jamesson sometime ago around here. We didn’t have time to talk much with him. I believe he

showed us some bones that appeared to be human. Let's see! Yes! He showed us a skull—a big skull that was twice as large as mine, with an overdropping forehead, and the face of a frog! Those Manalava heathens had the same kind of froggish faces!”

“Then that evidently proves Dr. Jamesson’s contention that a race of freaks exists or existed here in Death Valley!” Professor Bloch slapped a thigh enthusiastically. Then turning to me he said: “Dowell, I told your City Editor that something was going to be found out here to substantiate Jamesson’s assertions.”

The Prospector’s Story

I NODDED. “But what’s the story about Driftin’ Sands and Allie Lane?” I inquired of the prospector. It sounded like a good human interest yarn to me. I did not believe that it had any significance with Professor Bloch’s project but it would make great feature stuff!

“Yes, yes! Go ahead with your story, old timer, by all means,” the professor said.

“Well,” the prospector began, somewhat wildly, “As I said, that’s a terrible place, that Manalava flat, and we were near the end of our strings when we reached it.

“Our water was gone. We had two good drinks from a barrel cactus before we reached the edge of the Manalava flats. That rotten stuff didn’t help any to quench our thirst. Near the flats we found a good spring with dead men’s bones strewn around it. A fight had taken place there once—Indians and whites, and they must have fought for the water.

“The spring lies in a little box canyon opening out into the valley. Sands and I could see the sun glistening on the whitened bones even while we were yet a mile away from them. Our water was gone and it was safer to continue than to turn back.

“The whites had held the spring and the Indians fought from behind boulders on the hillsides. By the spring there’s a semi-circle of old prairie schooners with arrowheads sticking in the rotted framework. You can find more arrowheads around the skeletons. There are no

drafts there and the bones have lain untouched for years. Even coyotes and buzzards have stayed away from the Manalava Plain! I don't understand why Indians, with their superstition, would venture near the earthly hell.

"The spring was worth fighting for, I said to myself, as I ducked my head in the water. The water was cool and tasted good, but it had a greenish tint—that was the color peculiar to the heathens under the Manalava Plain! We camped at the spring all night.

"Sands did not sleep well that night. He seemed to be high-strung and excited in the morning. He claimed that he heard voices throughout the night and after breakfast he began talking about Allie Lane.

"You've heard the tale about Allie Lane, of course. Everybody who has lived in California long must have heard about it. She was Sand's sweetheart back in Kansas City when he was a youngster. He came to California first and Allie, with her father, started West with a wagon train the following spring in 1880. If that train had ever arrived, Sands would have known it. For over forty years he had been searching for news of Allie up and down the coast until it cracked his mind some.

"Allie must have meant a lot to him, for he never married and for forty years he's been drifting over California asking folks if they'd ever met up with anybody by the name of Lane from Kansas City.

"Allie Lane had been a member of a train such as lay scattered around the spring. This was worrying him, I could see. He was a bit off on the subject after having searched for her so long. It taxed his brain, and Sands was an old man. I watched him as he pattered and poked around those whitened, petrified bones.

"There was a wagon train—the remains of one that had probably taken the southern route across from El Paso, heading into California over the old Fremont Trail. It wasn't necessary for them to head into Death Valley; so they must have gone off the right trail and

strayed through an unknown pass into the Valley where they died fighting the Apaches at this water hole.

“I tried to argue the old fellow out of the idea that Allie Lane had been killed, telling him that she had arrived safe, married, and forgotten all about him. But he would have none of it and flew into a rage, saying that she promised to wait for him and that he’d meet her alive in California. I let it go at that.

“I sat down on the wreck of one of the schooners and watched him putter around the bones. He had loved this Allie Lane in the days of his youth when he left her back in Kansas City. I suppose he had an indelible picture of her as she was when he left her, stamped in his brain, and did not figure that now she would be an old lady, even if she was alive.

“So Driftin’ Sands continued his two great searches. One was for Allie Lane, first and always, and the other was for gold of which he had found plenty.

“I’m sure that Sands and I were the first to enter that Canyon since the fight by the spring. There was not a speck of ashes to prove that anyone else had ever camped there.

“The canyon was free from sand storms, and sheltered on practically all sides except for the Valley opening; and even if the sight of human bones would drive one away, there was always the spring to lure a man back. But it was hard on the nerves to stay there. There was something eerie and ghostly about the whole section of desert that was not caused by a few bones scattered around. We were to learn what it was later.

“Sands found an old trunk half buried in the sand. It was rotted and sprung by sun and weather and it crumbled at the touch of a hand. In that trunk Sands found an old family picture album. The photographs were so dim that very few were distinguishable. He pored over them nervously and when he had gone almost to the last page, his shaking fingers held a leaf. He found a picture that glued his eyes to the rotted book and then I had my first sight of Allie Lane!

CHAPTER II - What Sands Heard

“THE face on the tintype displayed the features of the most beautiful girl I have ever seen! Her features were clear-cut, her eyes soft and appealing. In spite of the years, that one picture, out of a hundred old tintypes, remained clear and distinct. Underneath the picture was a written description that we could not read with the naked eye. The ink had long since disappeared, leaving only faint traces of point imprints. I got out my magnifying glass that I used to study ore specimens, and read the words:

“Allie Lane,

“Kansas City, Missouri.

March 19, 1878

“I handed the glass to Sands and went over to douse my head in the spring. You see, I’d heard the name of Allie Lane so many times that when I came face to face with that picture of her, it fairly upset me.

“Presently Sands returned my glass and without speaking we packed our outfit, rolled in the spring, and struck off toward the Manalava Plain.

“That night was like all the rest. We wrapped ourselves in blankets and slept. But toward morning Sands awakened me.

“ ‘Pardner! Get up!’ he said. ‘I hear a wagon passing off there in the valley and if we hit the trail now we can hook up with it until we reach the Manalava Springs. It’s a long hike to the flats and water’s scarce! Hear the wagon crashin’ through the brush?’

“I raised on my elbow and listened. There was not a sound to be heard. I looked at Sands queerly. Was the heat and the excitement of seeing Allie’s picture, affecting his mind, and anyway, why should a wagon of all things be trekking thru the desert during the dead of night? Anyone but an utter fool would use an auto. But I yielded to his excitement and we

started out at once, leaving behind an extra blanket and some canned goods so as to travel lighter. I allowed Sands to lead where he thought the sounds came from.

“We went on and on, I all the while arguing that I could hear nothing while Sands insisted he heard the wagon continually.

“Little by little the gray and orange of approaching dawn began to steal over the valley. The world was assuming a definite shape and the day’s heat began to mount even before the first rays of the rising sun were visible. A mile in front of us a great, red streak rose against the skyline, looming dimly and awesomely out of the lightening eastern heavens. Sands remarked at its ghostliness and informed me that we were nearing the southern extremities of the terrible Manalava Plain. I had never been in the section of Death Valley and of a certainty. Sands had never been nearer than he was then.

“In some forgotten day a volcano had scattered its red hot lava and settled it into a stretch of plain which covered an area of thirty miles either way, although no trace of a volcanic mountain was visible. Bare and flat as a table-top and as hot under the glare of the sun as the inside of an oven! Such was the Manalava Plain, never explored, unmapped a lost world of its own.

“Sands kept on insisting we were coming nearer to the sounds.

“Rapidly it became light enough for us to see the Plain. The sun, a huge fiery ball, popped up almost suddenly from behind the Manalava Plain and instantly the world was sweltering. Its golden glow reflected on the red lava of the Plain and created a murky green haze that added to the heat and burned acridly through the lungs. The odor was ungodly and unworldly!

“ ‘There’s the wagon!’ Sands suddenly exclaimed.

“I looked all over the desert, and not a thing like a wagon did I see.

“ ‘I don’t see a thing,’ I told him soberly.

“ ‘You don’t,’ he exclaimed incredulously. ‘Why look out there.’ He pointed toward the base of a low hill. There was not a thing to be seen. I knew then that his mind was slipping under the terrific strain. I tried to argue with him. I even shot off my pistol to show him that there would be no response. But Sands insisted on going on. Rather than have him travel into that hell alone, I shook my head and followed after him.

“We climbed the buttress of a low hill and swung to the left, discovering a natural causeway that led up and out into the very table-top of the Manalava Plain itself.

“Before us in unbroken desolation lay the forgotten country—Manalava Plain! The formation of the floor was a soft lava-like surface— rock that had once flowed in liquid form and after hardening to some extent, gave the country a flat and shiny -appearance like a great field of red asphalt.

“ ‘The wagon is gone,’ Sands exclaimed suddenly.

“ ‘That’s mighty peculiar, Driftin’,’ I said ‘That they’re gone when you said that they weren t more than a mile ahead of us.’ ?

“ ‘I don’t savvy it at all,’ he replied. ‘But let’s follow further. They’ll sure need help.’

“Helplessly I followed.

Following A Phantom

HERE was the Manalava Plain— as flat and smooth as a plate of glass— and stretching for miles either way, bare and deserted. Surely we were the only actual beings on the mesa!

“Perhaps, I thought, old Driftin’ Sands was suffering from hallucinations. Perhaps the sight of the bleached bones back at the spring had gotten into his blood. I wanted to give up the chase but Sands declared again he would continue alone. I had no alternative but to

accompany him. To me death beckoned either way and I'd been with Sands so long now that a few more miles would not matter.

“Presently we came upon a weird sort of a cactus tree—a species of a kind that I'd never seen on the desert! It was red instead of green and had long, flowing branches like the tentacles of an octopus! The tentacles twitched restlessly although there was not a breath of wind to stir them. I warned Sands to stay a safe distance away from it. The thing seemed alive! Farther off, standing dimly in the green murky haze, I saw other trees like the one in front of us. They stood motionless and stiff.

“By all the laws of nature, the trees in front of us should not have been growing there—should not have been on this world at all! We stopped and looked at each other.

“We looked at the cactus closely. Its tentacles were waving spasmodically as though warning us to return from whence we came. I tore my eyes from it and studied the earth. Sands gasped when I pointed out to him the fragments of a human skull and other anatomical portions of the human frame, apparently crushed, strewn under the waving, rubber-like tentacles of this weird cactus.

“I felt an urge to dash away from the spot and it was with a mighty effort that I controlled an insanity that was creeping through my brain.

“‘Do you admit there's no wagon here,’ I yelled at Sands.

“‘I guess there isn't pardner,’ he acknowledged, downcast. His shoulders seemed to droop more than ever and the alertness in his eyes suddenly disappeared. ‘But how do you account for my hearin' a man, a woman and a wagon? They've got to be here; so lets follow them out.’

“My insane desire to run now manifested itself into a reality, and with Sands at my heels, I started off at a run. Eventually I steadied my racked brain and slowed the pace. Sands came up, breathing heavily at the exertion. I noticed that he had cast his pack away and clung

only to a gallon canteen in which I could hear the water sloshing around. The sound told me that it was almost empty.

“Presently we discovered the remains of an old schooner. It was just like those back at the spring. Its canvas tarpaulin, bleached white, clung from the top-ribs in streamers of gossamer. Not a single bone could be found in front of the wagon, lending more mystery to the trail. Where had the horses gone? What had become of them? Surely, there would be bleached skeletons in the traces had the horses been deserted.

“ ‘The horses laid down here.’ Sands was saying as to himself, kicking a foot at two wallows in front of the wagon. ‘But they must’ve got up and wandered away after restin’. See, the traces have been cut! The man picked up the woman and packed her off. His trail is deeper now. We ought to find ’em soon.’

“I said nothing. Perhaps he had seen something and I was the one who was mad. Some story was plainly written on this wagon. Sands pointed at the side board. Cut deep were the even letters of Alfred Forsythe Lane, Allie’s father. Below the name was a scratched message. With difficulty we read it.

“‘God have mercy on us. Our water is gone—this is the end. I love you, Robert Sands of Kansas City. If you ever see this, you will know!’

“Sands sat down on the rotting tongue of the wagon and cried. His great, booming voice quivered with emotion as his body twitched with sobs. Tears rolled down his withered, weatherbeaten face in spite of the terrific heat of the Plain that sucked the moisture from our bodies. Hands, gnarled with years of toil and sorrow, fondly held the old tintype taken from the faded album found at the spring.

The Radium Pool

“SANDS straightened. His eyes, now dry and O dim, surveyed me for a moment.

“ ‘You’d better take this water, pardner,’ he said, ‘and hit the back trail! I’m going to follow this to the end and there’ll be no return. You take it and go back to your wife and kids! They’ll be needin’ you, pard, like Allie needed me. Take it!’

“Instinctively I reached out for his proffered canteen. Then I thought better of it. I certainly did want to go back. What would my wife and kids do if I failed to return! But if I deserted Sands I would never be able to live it down. I decided to stick it out. A few more miles could not matter now and the chances of me finding my way out were mighty slender, anyway.

“‘I couldn’t take it, Sands,’ I said. ‘I’d rather go ahead and see what’s beyond. I—I—er—er rather like this hike, you know.’

“And so I followed him again.

“ ‘There they go, pardner!’ he shouted finally. ‘Down the draw! Hurry and we’ll catch up with them!’

“I looked up in time to see two forms crawling on hands and knees down the draw. But I am certain that my own mind was giving way to hallucinations, and so to satisfy Sands I started forward at a trot. Sands was at my side. As he ran, his jaws were beating a loud tattoo. My heart ached for him and his sweetheart whom he’d searched for so long—Allie Lane! Maybe he would find her, I thought. But how!

“Presently we arrived at what we thought was the draw down which the two crawling figures had vanished. Instead of finding what we expected we actually encountered a saucer-like crater which I assumed at once to have been the one from which the lava forming the Manalava Plain had erupted. We stood on the brink of the yawning pit and noted that in the center, surrounded by overhanging lava forming a circular cave, brilliant with a green

phosphorescent glow, was a pool probably a hundred feet in width. The pool seemed as alive as that grotesque cactus with its restless tentacles.

“The pale green that filled it, with its ghostly hue, reminded us of the spring at which we found the Lane album. The material shimmered and scintillated and even from our height we felt a terrific heat that must have come from the stuff. There was a powerful odor coming from it, too, sweet and nauseating. The glare from the pool seemed to burn our skin even at the distance we stood from it. Nowhere was there a sign of the mysterious crawling figures—the man and the woman, although under our feet were the marks of a ragged trail.

“ ‘My Lord, Sands !’ I shouted, ‘the heat of that pool tells me that it must be radium.’

“Sands looked at me with a puzzled frown.

“ ‘Hell!’ he expostulated, ‘there’s not that much radium in the whole world and we wouldn’t know it if we seen a lake of it. Looks like some green salt solution to me and indications point to some funny deposits here! What’s that unearthly noise?’

“I cupped my hands behind my ears to catch the sound that Sands had heard. My hair literally stood on ends. Spooky? Lord! I couldn’t have moved a foot if I wanted to. I was glued to the spot. The weird sound, like the low moan of a woman in mortal agony, issued from the circular cave surrounding the luminous pool. It grew louder until the Manalava Plain groaned under the tumult. The sounds penetrated to the core of the brain and seemed to beckon us down into the crater. Sands was swaying to and fro as he stood on the slight parapet overlooking the crater, in perfect rhythm to the tempo of the devilish sounds. I felt that I too was keeping the same accompaniment and it was with an effort that I broke the spell.

“My hand dropped to my gun butt. I tore it out of its holster and fired rapidly, thumbing the hammer, into the pool. Sands yelled. Like a living fountain, long columns of luminous green and red and violet flame shot up to the parapet. Simultaneously we both

leaped back. The air seemed alive with some mysterious vibrations. Finally it died away and the tumult issuing from the circular cave settled down to a low, steady hum. We once again stood on the crater's escarpment and looked within. The pool was glittering restlessly.

“ ‘We might as well have a close look at that pool, pardner,’ Sands reminded me as I stood rooted on the edge of the crater, studying the formation surrounding the pool. ‘I can't make it out. If it's some radium compound, you'll be a rich man. Your wife an' kids back in Balch will be needin' it, I'm a thinkin'. Let's go down.’

“Sands stepped over the escarpment. I followed him down into the crater. We paused about twenty feet from the edge of the pool. The heat was terrific — so great that it caused the blood to race to my head, and my heart to beat rapidly. And more intense came that mysterious vibration in the air, and a something that seemed to be eating into my flesh. I remarked about the phenomenon to Sands and told him that it must have been caused by some unknown power of radium. Rather than risk touching the stuff I threw a piece of cloth on it. There was a little sizzle and the cloth seemed literally to vanish before our eyes! He then took his revolver and dipped it in. The hard steel of the barrel melted like lead in a blast furnace, yet the butt in his hand did not heat beyond sun-temperature. The melted steel floated to the surface like slag and drifted out into the center of the pool, to sink again in a tiny whirl. Sands fondled his useless gun speculatively.

“ ‘Pardner,’ he said, ‘You're lookin' into a pool of some radium compound! It must be radium for I've seen about everything else in its line. If Allie and her father came too close to this, you can imagine what happened to them. I fear the worst.’

“ ‘Well,’ I said, ‘I don't like to think that your friends ended near the pool. We might see some bones if they did. Let's take a look under these overhanging shelves. The caves might tell us something.’

“ ‘I don’t reckon we’ll find anything, pardner,’ Sands returned, sick at heart and utterly dejected.

“ ‘Can’t tell! We’ve seen so many strange things that I’m interested,’ I said.

“By all the laws of human nature and its greed for the precious, Sands and I should have danced around the radium pool with glee over our discovery. Untold wealth lay exposed before us, but under the sadness of our circumstances, the living, pulsating pool was nothing. The radium, which we believed oozed out of the old volcanic crater, could ruin the world, with its great power and radio-active qualities.

CHAPTER III - Eldorado

AT any rate, we picked our way carefully, shielding our faces, remaining as close to the cave wall as possible, peeping intently into the greenly illuminated circular cavern. Glowing stalactites hung from the cave ceilings in mystic forms. Precious stones and metals in countless numbers cropped out of the lava-like formations. Rock which Sands had accepted previously as cinnabar was red rock-lava bearing iron pyrites and black quartz, containing a wealth of sapphire and diamond-like stones that glittered invitingly under the glare of the green rays cast off by the pool.

“ ‘My God, Sands!’ I shouted eagerly, forgetting momentarily my sorrows and sympathies for Sands and his sweetheart of long ago. ‘We’ve struck it! This is the real El Dorado! It is like the myths handed down by the Spaniards ! Wealth! Riches! Power and—

“ ‘ and unhappiness, greed and all the rest!’

Sands added, staring at me curiously. ‘It means the fulfillment of your dreams, pardner. You know what it means to me! To me it means the loss of all that I’ve ever held dear in this life. It means that I’ve spent my life in quest of happiness—and lost it right here at this pool! Do you realize that, pardner?’

“I most certainly did realize it and I calmed down to once again share Sands’ great sorrow. He had trailed Allie Lane and her father over the forty-year old trail. Here we believed that it ended forever. No need to search farther. Yet for some unaccountable reason, Sands insisted that she was still alive or if not alive, some remains must exist in that vicinity.

“As we continued our search and explorations near the mouth of the cave, the weird, ominous moaning that vaguely portended the advent of something untoward, became audible again. Sands and I stopped in our tracks to listen. Coming from the far side of the pool, the moaning increased gradually until it became a steady wail like the shriek of high-speed machinery. We stood watching the spot which unlike the part of the crater on our side, did not glow with the green luminosity. It seemed to be an inky black pit. Not even a stalactite was visible!

“Suddenly as We stared at the spot, the blackness became shot with myriads of colors until it glittered blindingly. The wail was now a terrific shriek. The Manalava Plain seemed to groan under some tremendous impulse emanating from below our feet. The earth swayed and rumbled. From the pool, came a mysterious sputtering and a tiny swirl in its center at first, suddenly became a whirling maelstrom. A thin, silver-like column rose several feet into the air from its middle. Like a miniature water-spout, typical of typhoon infested sections of the South Seas, the rising column whirled faster and faster.

“Meanwhile, the once black, bottomless abyss which had suddenly become charged with blinding colors, was changing now to a more solid hue. Green was transplanting the reds and vermillions, and thin, wisp-like rays of yellow that seemed to charge the atmosphere with a super high-tension activity, were twitching nervously in the pit. Gradually the colors merged into a solid mass of luminous green and out of it spun a glistening sphere that appeared to be a ball of the same liquid that was now whirling over the pool!

“The sphere, probably twenty feet in diameter, moved slowly at first, toward the pool, its surface glowing as it revolved with a terrific speed. The atmosphere became stagnant and penetrated deep into the lungs, but Sands and I were too stupefied to move a muscle. I felt a sudden panic seize me and then breaking the grip of stupefaction I ran like a mad man along the edge of the whirling maelstrom. I was struck with fright. You cannot conceive my terror as I stumbled along the pool! I forgot about Sands—forgot about everything in my blind unreasoning. I felt no fatigue as I ran, only stark, mad terror.

“In my wild terrified scramble for safety, I ran past the only exit or entrance down into the crater and soon found myself face to face with the spinning sphere! Bright, swift moving lights passed around the sphere as it emerged from the abyss. The yellow rays were gone now and as I stared at it in my utter terror, the sphere began to glow like a great emerald ball. The high-pitched scream was more terrific here and it pounded in my eardrums with a metal-edged sharpness that sent me blind and unreasoning back around the other side of the pool! In my terror I thumped into Sands, who was standing in the same spot where he had been when I started my mad dash. The collision brought us both to the crater floor, clutching for the slightest handhold to prevent us from rolling into the ghastly pool. At the very edge of the pool we came to a stop. Sands put out a hand to brace himself but the tips of his fingers accidentally dipped into the liquid. He jerked back his hand with a bellow. The first digits of his left hand had disappeared, leaving instead, completely healed stumps! The shock of the collision restored my sanity and I helped Sands to his feet.

“We cast quick glances at the sphere. It had moved from the opening of the pit, now lighted brilliantly red, and was whirling at the top of the column in the center of the pool! Gradually the high-pitched scream became a steady hum. The sphere was spinning faster and faster under the whirling pressure of the column. The ball was changing slowly into cylindrical shape, with a sharp-pointed nose and concave butt which gradually thinned out. I

stared with disbelief. Surely my brain was playing pranks. I shot a glance at Sands. The old fellow seemed like a statue, immobile as a rock. Insanity was gripping him, I could see, and I screamed.

“Suddenly, the hum of the sphere’s rapid whirling motion ceased. Like a bullet shaped projectile it shot into the air, charging it with sparks of pale green lights that drifted back into the pool and settled. We caught a glimpse of the projectile as it leaped from the column. That was all. Immediately it was gone leaving behind only the floating green lights that, even in the radiance of midday, shone brilliantly. The fearful scream of its passing through the atmosphere gradually died away as its distance increased. At my scream Sands had regained control of himself. He placed a palsied hand on my shoulder and stared at me incredulously.

The Skeleton

“DID you see it, pardner?” he asked, completely unnerved.

“ ‘Yes !’ I answered, ‘I’ve seen it whatever the thing was!’

“Sands stared at me, mouth agape.

“ ‘Pardner,’ he said, ‘you look like a ghost! You’re face and hands are turning green! Your skin is getting the same color as the stuff in the pool!’

“ ‘You don’t look like a white man yourself, Sands,’ I managed to jest at him, trying to control my agitation.

“ ‘Mebbe,’ he returned, somewhat calmed, ‘but, by jingle, I’m beginning to feel younger! Maybe this is that fountain of youth the old spies raved about!’

“ ‘You must have just come into your second childhood,’ I smiled back at him, weakly. He managed to grin and I saw something that startled me almost as much as did the luminous sphere.

“Sands’ face was actually clearing! Deep furrowed wrinkles that had marked him as an old man, sun-hardened and leathery, were vanishing from his face! Except for a month’s growth of beard, he appeared to have dropped, in those few minutes, many years of his age. His brown eyes that were dim, and watery, were taking on a sparkle that signifies the vigorous health of youth. His bowed shoulders straightened. In spite of the rapid change he was going through, the greenish hue remained to mar his features with a ghastly pallor caused, no doubt, by the radioactive power of the radium. As for myself, I could feel no change in my physical being. I wondered if the great radium deposit was to blame. I knew that science held transmutation of elements possible and has even accomplished it in a small way and that radium itself is the product of disintegration of uranium and ionium.

“For some reason, Sands and I felt better after the hurtling projectile had lifted from the whirling pool and passed into the infinite. After a short conference we decided to investigate the strange phenomenon we had witnessed, and at the same time continue our search for Allie Lane and her father, or whatever traces of them might remain. Our brains were clear as bells now, our wits sharp in spite of so many strange happenings that occurred since early that morning. After it all, we thought, we could not be surprised at anything that might arise in the future, and we might as well explore further, the weird circular cave and the black hole which we noticed still retained its red glow. Sands remarked that if the red glow continued to illuminate the cave from which had come the whirling sphere, there would be no need of the small carbide lamp I had in my pack still strapped to my shoulders. The only thing that seemed to worry us was the absence of water. Our canteens were practically empty and naturally we wanted to refill them if we could. We seemed to have no thirst and a strange comfort appeased the dryness of our throats.

“We single-filed along the edge of the pool toward the luminous red cave. In several minutes we had reached the entrance to our glowing objective. At the entrance of the cave

with its glow of red radiancy, Sands and I paused before entering. What we saw there caused Sands to leap backward. I stood stock still, awed at the sight, not knowing what to do.

“On either side of the cave, hung intact, were the skeletons of two human beings! With skulls grinning like green ghosts, the skeletons hung against the side butts of the cave’s entrance ! Weirdly radiant with the pale green hue, the bones stood out in high relief against the red glow of the strange illumination as though to warn us that to go further meant doom.

“I turned at the sound of Sands’ getting to his feet. He stood at my side, mouth agape.

“ ‘That, pardner,’ he said, softly, ‘means the end Of our search ! I have hoped for the best for Allie and her dad, but what we see now tells the story of their deaths!’

“Sands doffed his hat and hung his head in reverence. I did likewise for I was thinking along the same lines. Sadly I lifted my head and again speculated on the skeletons. I was trying to figure who might have hung those grisly relics on the wall of the cavern. Whoever it was, I thought, had scant respect for the dead! The two could at least have been given decent burials. I clenched my fists and swore. Sands lifted his head suddenly at the oaths which escaped my lips. His hand grasped my sleeve.

“ ‘What’s wrong, pardner?’ he asked, with a trace of anger in his voice.

“ ‘I’m just wondering. Sands,’ I replied, ‘how they came to be hung up there like that. They couldn’t hang themselves in suicide and the bones remain intact. Let’s look closer!’

“We moved closer to the dangling relics. As I had implied, the bones were linked together with wire and hung against the wall with metal pegs!

“ ‘The dogs!’ Sands hissed in my ear, his voice steady and as strong as a young man of twentyfive. I looked at him curiously and indeed, he was a young man again, save for his whiskers. Strangely, I thought, had we actually come upon the mythical Fountain of Youth that the early Spaniards actually believed existed in one of the Seven Lost Cities of Cibola?

Were we about to find, here in Death Valley, one of those seven cities? Hardly! My imagination must be running wild, I thought.

“ ‘Maybe some prospector had found these deposits, Sands,’ I whispered, ‘and hung those skeletons there to keep others away. It’s not impossible.’

“ ‘No,’ Sands said, ‘it’s not impossible, but it isn’t likely! Skeletons wouldn’t frighten a man away from a great wealth like lies here. Your idea don’t explain that crazy ball of metal, either. I think there’s more to this than shows on the surface.’

“ ‘Perhaps you’re right at that,’ I acknowledged, ‘but who in hell would want to hang a couple of grinning skeletons out here like that? By the way did you compare the bones?’

“ ‘Yes, I did compare them and I’m convinced that they are the bones of two men. Neither is a woman! They are not Allie and her father!’”

“I felt better at that. Buoyed up by the discovery, Sands’ never dying hope that he would still find his lost sweetheart Allie Lane, expressed itself in his features.

“ ‘And I feel that Allie is alive,’ he continued. ‘I don’t know why I feel it. It might be what we call a coincidence or just a hunch, but I think we’ll find her near here!’

“ ‘Poor girl,’ I muttered.

“I expected to find the age-whitened bones of Allie Lane and her father but events seemed to have bred within me a belief such as Sands’.

CHAPTER IV - Into the Cavern

“I FELT that our search was at its end when we beheld the two skeletons, but our observations told us that they were the remains of two heavy-set men, one of whom had the ball of an old time bullet lodged in his right wrist bone. We concluded that they had been a couple of frontier bandits or prospectors who wandered onto the Manalava Plain and died there of thirst. Sands strode over to the wall and lifted a skeleton from the pegs. I watched

him with amazement. The rattle of the bones sounded oddly in the crater. He threw one and then the other into the pool. As we watched, intently, the bones slowly sank and vanished until there was nothing left. The stuff must have been horribly thick and viscous to retain it on the surface so long.

“ ‘That’s about the best burial they’ll ever get,’ he muttered. ‘I’d hate to die knowing that my bones would be hung on a wall to frighten folks away!’

“I agreed with Sands. He seemed a different man altogether from the wrinkled old gent to whom I had been accustomed. With many of his years gone, and apparently young again, he was wideawake to the adventures at hand. Without further words, he strode lightly to the entrance of the luminous cavern. I followed, choosing to be led rather than lead.

“Carefully we picked our way into the tunnel which widened perceptibly beyond the entrance. Inside, the red glow was more pronounced. Sparkling gems, cropping out of the walls, glittered brilliantly under the red radiance. A well worn path” led along the center of the cavern’s floor and we followed it for perhaps a hundred yards on a downward angle of probably five or six degrees. We observed small caves branching off from the main tunnel, but we continued along the trail of the larger one.

“Suddenly, as we picked our way along the path, we heard the sounds of a dismal chant. Steadily the sound increased. The entire cavern reverberated with the ominous sound and almost from the moment it reached our ears, we found ourselves in total darkness! The entrance of the cave which had previously been open to the sun-light and looked bright and inviting from the cavern’s interior, was now totally dark! The inky blackness was as oppressing as the damp, stagnant air was nauseating. I reached out and grabbed Sands’ arm so that we would not get separated. At the same time I jerked my gun out of the holster. Sands grunted when he heard the click of the hammer being drawn back under the thumb.

“ ‘Don’t shoot until you’re sure what you’re shootin’ at, pard,’ he whispered in my ear. ‘I think I hear footsteps off there to the left. Get around me or let me have the hog-laig !’

“ ‘I hear something in back of me, Sands,’ I replied, a little nervously. ‘Something seems to be flyin’ around our heads like bats but I don’t hear the whirr of wings!’

“ ‘Don’t move then !’ he advised.

“ ‘That’s a hell of a racket, ain’t it?’ I remarked, trying to control my agitation.

“We stood closer together in the blackness. The tunnel reeked with an evil odor that was sweet and lung-tickling. I have smelled something like that before in caves where wild cats had holed up, but this was a thousand times stronger.

“ ‘No use standing here, pardner,’ Sands whispered softly, ‘I can’t hear any more footsteps and the bats seem to have vanished. Suppose you light up the carbide lamp. I want to look around in here but not in the dark. Might fall into a hole!’

“ ‘Let’s stand still a few more minutes,’ I said. ‘I’m a little uneasy about this. I want to get my bearings for a line on that opening where we came in. Looks like the hole has been closed up.’

“ ‘That hole couldn’t be closed without us hearing it!’

“ ‘With that noise down below you couldn’t hear it anyhow!’ I argued. ‘Sounds like a pack of demons thirstin’ for blood!’

“ ‘It don’t sound any too good, I’ll admit that,’ Sands acknowledged. ‘It might be wind caused by an underground suction, or chlorine gas blowing out of a volcanic fissure. The stink smells like chlorine gas.’

“We peered into the darkness trying to penetrate a solid wall of unfathomable black. My eyes ached under the strain. I removed my hand from Sands’ arm to rub them.

“Suddenly a darting light passed like a meteor through the blackness above, showering green, luminous sparks to the floor of the cave! In the brilliant light I caught sight

of Sands' features. The expression on his face told me that he had barely missed being struck by the glaring missile. He yelled loudly to drop down flat, as another light in the form of a sphere apparently of molten metal, darted over us, dropping a shower of floating sparks.

“Instantly the meteor-like ball was followed by other bright, swift-moving lights which passed perilously close to us and raced to the end of the tunnel toward the entrance. Their passing was marked by a low, droning hum of a likeness to the drone of the big sphere that had been shot from the whirling column in the center of the pool.

“Lying flat on our backs on the hard lava floor of the cavern back there under the terrible Manalava Plains, Sands and I watched the space above us. Closer and closer came a steady stream of brilliant lights that permeated the already nauseating air with the odor of burning carbon! I raised my gun several times to fire at one of the lights but thought better of it until I was sure of hitting the mark. Meanwhile I began to think what might happen should I actually succeed in striking one of them. I asked Sands' advice. He suggested that I try my luck.

“I raised my head a little to look down into the tunnel. Issuing from what appeared to be a deep hole perhaps a half mile ahead, came a spinning ball of glaring fire. It hovered for an instant over the yawning, luminous hole and then darted in our direction at a terrific speed. I lifted my gun from my hip. When the light was near enough, I pulled the trigger.

“The sharpness of the concussion filled me with fear, but in the instant the light was gone. Only a shower of sparks remained to prove that my slug had gone true. The sparks lay on the tunnel floor, glowing like lumps of molten copper, green and red.

“We lay on the ground for several minutes more. Then I nudged Sands. We walked along the path for perhaps a dozen feet and then I realized that our sense of direction was gone altogether. We were completely lost in a strange world of blackness pierced only by mysterious lights and sounds, of whose origin I could not guess.

A Place of Terror

“PRESENTLY we realized that it was folly to wander around when any step might precipitate us into unknown dangers. I had an unpleasant feeling of helpless fear that was gradually overcoming my reasoning powers again.

“At times I looked fearfully to the right and left, but saw nothing but blackness. The glowing remains of the light had long since died out and the cave was once again in total darkness. There was no life, no sound, no motion except for the movements of Sands and me. Allie Lane at that time was very remote from my thoughts. I was thinking of personal safety and although I had some assurance in the feel of my gun in my hand and its effectiveness on the dangerous lights, I was nevertheless fearful. I felt the panic of utter isolation from humanity. I was in a different world entirely!

“Sands suggested again that I get out my carbide lamp. I hesitated, fearful lest our positions be clearly defined in the light, and lay us open to further danger from the fast floating lights and their sources.

“Stagnation—everything sinking and stale! The cavern smelled of sheer funk. It curled our nostrils and nauseated our stomachs to such an extent that I became violently ill temporarily.

“ ‘Let’s get out of here. Sands!’ I whispered. ‘I think we are headed into the cave and if we turn around we can reach the opening.’

“ ‘We can try it. I’d like to get a breath of air.’

“ ‘Hold on to me then,’ I said, ‘we’ll get out!’

“ ‘Mebbe!’

“With Sands holding onto my arm we turned around and began a slow, deliberate walk back to what we thought was the entrance to the cave, long since dark. For perhaps

fifteen minutes we picked our way along the cave not knowing what step might sink us into death.

“Suddenly I collided with a solid wall. Around the edges the sunlight of the outer world flickered and I knew that it was the entrance to the cave.

“We were stunned when we discovered that the entrance had been closed solidly with massive slabs of rock! The air was less heavy and stagnant here and we sat down after a strenuous effort to roll back the rock wall that trapped us. We rested, motionless on the floor of the cave. I could not see Sands but sounds of his heavy, even breathing came to me. We were too exhausted even to speak but I suddenly felt the pangs of hunger.

“I slipped my pack from my shoulders and felt within it. I handed Sands several squares of hardtack and a bar of chocolate for which he mumbled his thanks. Ravenously I devoured my ration; then got out my carbide lamp and toyed with it.

“As I sat I noticed that the low moaning sounds that we had previously heard were again issuing from deep within the cave. I shuddered. The sounds beat terrifically on my brain and in my terror I drew my gun and fired four shots rapidly toward the interior.

“Instantly the hole was a bedlam! I leaped to my feet to run but tripped over Sands’ outstretched feet and tumbled to the floor.

“‘Take it easy, pardner!’ Sands advised, softly, his voice quivering. At his calm words I lay down quietly.

“You cannot conceive my terror. Could I have but known the reasons and the causes for the many things we had seen and the incidents that happened, I would have been better able to control myself. Terrified, I lay on the floor of the cave and it was a long time before I was able to think. Meanwhile the cavern was in pandemonium. The moaning sounds had again become a wail which gradually developed into high-pitched shrieking. I expected

momentarily to see another huge whirling sphere shooting toward the entrance of the cave where we lay panic-stricken.

“To my horror, the cave began to lighten with the green luminous glow, and a score of yards beyond I saw what appeared to be a sluggish red stream, thick and mucky, flowing toward us. I kicked at Sands to draw his attention to it.

“ ‘I see it, pardner,’ he whispered. ‘What do you think it is?’ ”

“ ‘Lord!’ I answered. ‘If I only knew!’

“ ‘Let me have your lamp. I’m going to take a chance on lighting it. We’ve got to get out of here!’

“My blood turned cold at the mention of the carbide lamp. For the first time I learned that it was not in my hands! At my attempt to run, I thought I must have dropped the lamp with my pack. At any rate it was gone! We crawled around the floor of the cave hoping to feel it. The murky green glow in the tunnel did not help us any at all. It only added to the disguise of the cave’s interior.

“Sands cursed me for a fool at allowing the lamp to drop from my hands, leaving us without a means of penetrating the darkness. My pack, which I had placed on my knees before me, when digging out our rations, was gone likewise. Nowhere could they be found. We searched the floor of the cave minutely in the sickly green light but without success.

“Suddenly the cave became brilliant with light. The suddenness of the change from darkness blinded my eyes and instinctively my hands shot up to cover them. It stunned me for a moment and then I looked around.

“I stared incredulously at the sight; then turned to look at Sands. He was poised on his hands and knees, stopped by the sudden light, in his search for the lamp and the grub pack. His mouth hung open. I looked up again.

Strange Beings

STANDING around us in a circle stood a score of the strangest man-like beings I ever beheld. They stood motionless, surveying us. Towering high above Sands and me, the strangers looked down through great eyes that blinked slow and deliberate like owls' orbs in the night. Instinctively my hand shot down to my gun butt. When it neared the metal it stopped and I jerked my hand away. The gun seemed charged with powerful electricity! I managed to grin foolishly under the glare of twoscore blinking eyes. Then I made a careful appraisal of the beings surrounding us.

“Tall in stature—probably seven feet high, they towered above us. With great heads void of hair, powerful bull necks, barrel chests and long skinny limbs that appeared to be of rubber like the tentacles on the weird cactus back on the Manalava Plain, the creatures to the human eye, were repulsively grotesque! Their arms, thin and sinuous, like their legs, seemed of rubber and they hung motionless at their sides. I looked for hands. There were none. At the ends of the tentacle-like arms, there seemed to be sucker-like cups like the end of an elephant's trunk!

“For several moments they stood appraising us. Likewise we studied them. I noticed that above their heads waved two thin, flexible tubes that curled at the end and were attached to the brows just above their owlish orbs. Like the antennae on a desert butterfly, the tubes twitched this way and that! The absence of ears at the sides of their flat, heads added bestiality to their repulsive features, and their mouths, like the jaws of a toad, were pointed and bony! Each had the face of a frog and all looked alike except that the creature standing nearest to me and in front of the rest, was perhaps a head taller. He wore a brightly-hued belt of metal around his narrow, skinny hips.

“The big fellow's tubes at his forehead were waving nervously. I stared at him blankly for I had a peculiar feeling that somehow he was trying to speak to me. I shot an

inquiring glance at Sands. He was still in the same position. His knit brows displayed a growing uneasiness. Surely, I thought, these grotesque fellows were not hostile, otherwise they would have made short work of us!

“I crawled slowly to my feet and stood erect in front of the repellant fellow, who was apparently the leader of the frog-featured beings. His green, i luminous face was tilted down to me and from it radiated the warmth of radium. He towered three heads above me and I felt like a pigmy beside him and equally as helpless.

“ ‘Well ,’ I managed to say, in astonishment.

“His tubes stood out stiff and motionless. A strange power seemed to be penetrating into my crazed brain and his attitude made me feel that he was reading my thoughts. Suddenly my brain was struck with a direct question, although I heard no voice.

“ ‘What are you doing here?’ a strange, silent voice seemed to ask.

“In answer my thoughts asked the same question and instinctively my lips blurted out the words evasively. The awesome creature snapped his froglike mouth and his antennae stood rigid.

“ ‘Answer me! The silent demand was hostile under the glare of his owlish orbs.

“My hand hung close to the butt of my gun but I kept my fingers from touching it. My brain was a whirl of thoughts, making clear thinking impossible. There seemed to be a peculiar power continually stirring my brain, building up slowly an explanation for our presence there. I opened my mouth to speak but the strange power ordered me to keep it shut and to think. I looked around for Sands. He was standing at my side, his face as green as the ghastly faces in front of me. I felt somewhat assured by his presence and then my thoughts raced, omitting no episode of the long search by my partner for his sweetheart, Allie Lane. My thoughts told of tracing Allie and her father to the radium pool and how, on discovering

the cave, we had decided to search within it for some remains of the ill-fated friends of Sands.

“In my excitement I blurted the question: “ ‘Has anyone here ever heard of Allie Lane—have you ever seen her?’

“The big fellow turned his tubes towards Sands as though to question him. Sands must have been thinking terrible things about the grotesque beings who stood around us, for the big fellow reached out a rubber-like arm and suddenly circled it around his neck. Jerked from his feet, Sands fell to the floor with a curse.

“ ‘Get him pardner!’ he yelled at me. ‘Shoot him!’

“The suddenness of the hostile move against my friend naturally forced me into action and in spite of the peculiar heat in the metal of my gun, I drew it from its holster and fired point blank into the big fellow’s face.

“I expected to see him fall and the others dash away but the fellow merely croaked like a frog and tightened his hold upon Sands. A small, round hole appeared in his face where my slug had struck him just below the left eye. A yellow liquid that glowed like fire, trickled out of the hole for an instant, then vanished as the wound rapidly closed up! I jammed my gun into the holster, amazed and fearful.

“Instantly the circle of strange creatures tightened around us. We were doomed men, I thought, as I was roughly lifted into the arms of one of the frog-faced beings!

(To be concluded)